



# The Norns *in* Old Norse Mythology

Karen Bek-Pedersen

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The *nornir* or norns were a group of female supernatural beings closely related to ideas about fate in Old Norse tradition. Karen Bek-Pedersen provides a thorough understanding of the role played by norns and other beings like them in the relevant sources. Although they are well known, even to people who have only a superficial knowledge of Old Norse mythology, this is the first detailed discussion of the norns to be published amongst the literature dealing with Old Norse beliefs.

Surprisingly little has been written specifically about the norns. Although often mentioned in scholarship treating Old Norse culture, the norns are all too often dealt with in overly superficial ways. The research presented in this book goes much deeper in order to properly understand the nature and role of the norns in the Old Norse world view. The conclusions reached by the author overturn a number of stereotypical conceptions that have long dominated our understanding of these beings.

The book has a natural focus on Old Norse culture and is especially relevant to those interested in or studying Old Norse culture and tradition. However, comparative material from Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Classical traditions is also employed and the book is therefore of interest also to those with a broader interest in European mythologies.

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For Derek — and a day spent at the Back of the Aisler.

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## List of Abbreviations

ÁBM	Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, <i>Íslensk Orðsifjabók</i>
AeW	Jan de Vries, <i>Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch</i>
ATU	Hans-Jörg Uther, <i>The Types of International Folktales</i>
CSI	Viðar Hreinsson (ed.), <i>The Complete Sagas of Icelanders</i> , 5 vols
C/V	Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, <i>An Icelandic–English Dictionary</i>
Frtz	Johan Fritzner, <i>Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog</i> , 3 vols
FSN	Guðni Jónsson, <i>Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda</i> , 4 vols
IeW	Alexander Jóhannesson, <i>Isländisches etymologisches Wörterbuch</i>
ÍF	<i>Íslensk Fornrit</i> , 35 vols
ÍS	Guðni Jónsson, <i>Íslendinga Sögur</i> , 14 vols
KLE	Klaus von See (ed.), <i>Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda</i> , Vol. 2–5
LP	Sveinbjörn Egilsson and Finnur Jónsson, <i>Lexicon Poeticum</i>
MS / MSS	manuscript / manuscripts
OED	J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, <i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i> , 20 vols
Skj	Finnur Jónsson, <i>Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning</i> AI+II and BI+II
SP	Skaldic Project website



## List of Manuscripts

In cases where a manuscript is known by a name as well as a number, the name is the designation used in the text.

AM 45 fol., c.1300–25 / *Codex Frisianus*

AM 61 fol., c.1350–75

AM 122 a fol., c.1350–70 / *Króksfjarðarbók*

AM 122 b fol., c. 1375–1400 / *Reykjarfjarðarbók*

AM 132 fol., c.1330–70 / *Möðruvallabók*

AM 162 A 8 fol., c.1300

AM 242 fol., c.1350

AM 285 4°, c.1600–1700

AM 291 4°, c.1275–1300

AM 448 4°, c.1686 (copy of the lost *Vatnshyrna*)

AM 468 4°, c.1300–25 / *Reykjabók*

AM 519 a 4°, c.1280

AM 544 4°, c.1300–25 / *Hauksbók*

AM 556 a 4°, c.1475–1500

AM 556 b 4°, c.1475–1500

AM 557 4°, c.1420–50

AM 559 4°, c.1686–8

AM 564 a 4°, c.1390–1425

AM 586 4°, c.1450–1500

AM 593 4°, c.1400–1500

AM 748 4°, c.1300–25

AM 748 Ib 4°, c.1300–25

## List of Manuscripts

AM 748 II 4º, c.1400

AM 757 a 4º, c.1400

AM 166 b 8º, c.1600–1700

Codex 136 fol. 84r (85r), tenth century

DG 11, c.1300–25 / *Uppsalabók*

Gks 1005 fol., c.1387–95 / *Flateyjarbók*

Gks 2365 4º, c.1270 / *Konungsbók*

Gks 2367 4º, c.1300–50

Gks 2845 4º, c.1450

Gks 2870 4º, c.1300 / *Gráskinna* (now only in a seventeenth-century transcript)

Holm perg 6 fol., c.1275

Holm papp 15 8º, c.1650–1700

ÍB 226 4º, c.1680–1700

Nks 1824 b 4º, c.1400–25

Nowell Codex (part of the Cotton Vitellius A.xv compilation), c.1000

Upps UB R 715, c.1650

*Tréktarbók* / *Codex Trajectinus*, c.1600

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## Introduction

Old Norse mythology portrays a group of three female supernatural beings called the *norns*, who act as representatives of the past, present and future, and who spin and weave fate for mankind. That, at least, is what you have probably always thought. Nothing as mundane as the facts of the matter is likely to quash the stereotypes, I suppose, but I have set myself the task of attempting to quash them nonetheless. This book is here to change your mind.

The book aims to provide an understanding of the role played by the *norns* in the world view current in the Scandinavian cultural area during the Viking Age and early medieval period. Although the *norns* are well known to most people who take an interest in Old Norse mythology, there is as yet no in-depth study of them among the literature dealing with Old Norse beliefs. This book sets out to redress that situation.

The first point to note is that the beings concerned are called *nornir* in Old Norse (sg. *norn*) and that the policy here will be to use the Old Norse terms rather than English approximations. The rationale is that, although some Old Norse terms have English renditions or approximations (*norns*, *valkyries* and *fetches* for *nornir*, *valkyrjur* and *fylgjur*), this is not the case for all beings that will be discussed below (for example *dísir*, *vanir*, *ásynjur*). I have therefore decided to employ the Old Norse terms across the board because the consistency of doing that greatly appeals to me. Where English words exist, these will be given in square brackets on the first usage of the term, for instance *valkyrja* [valkyrie]; thereafter, the Old Norse term will be the one employed.

The *nornir* are intriguing figures in the mythology. Playing predominantly cameo parts, they remain shadowy background figures and most of their appearances consist of brief references to their dealings behind the backs of human beings. We rarely get clear representations of who and what

the *nornir* really are, but we do hear enough about them to understand that they fulfilled a role in people's conceptual world during the period and area in question — the Scandinavian cultural area roughly between ad 800 and ad 1200, with 'Scandinavian' indicating the geographical areas where Old Norse language was dominant during that time. The *nornir* are rarely visible in person but remain present nonetheless, usually intangible, mostly out of focus and always complex.

The discussions that follow make reference to a range of other supernatural beings and characters, which overlap to a greater or lesser extent with the *nornir*. This book, however, focuses on the *nornir*, which means that other beings are discussed mainly in relation to them rather than in their own right.

It should also be noted that the sources involved in a study of the *nornir* draw on a large body of narrative material from Old Norse tradition and that it is not possible here to fully outline the narratives concerned in any way. The immediate context of quoted passages will be explained, but the remaining parts of the narratives will be left for the reader to explore (or imagine) in their own time.

Three questions have been fundamental to the present research: (1) Why is fate so often represented in feminine guise? (2) What is the connection between *nornir* and textile-related work? (3) What does it mean to regard fate as a kind of law? These questions have provided a basic structure for the book, but have not been allowed to constrain the research where sources seem to either categorise material differently or indicate contradicting ideas. The questions have also largely been allowed to subdivide the discussions, and the book therefore falls into four main chapters, each dealing with certain aspects of the *nornir* and the concept of fate in Old Norse tradition. They are preceded by a discussion of the source material in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2, 'What Is a Norn?' discusses the *nornir* according to mentions of them in skaldic and heroic poetry, but it also considers similarities and differences between *nornir* and other groups of beings commonly compared to them, especially *dísir* and *valkyrjur* [valkyries], as well as other female supernatural beings. This chapter seeks to outline what is special for each of these figures as well as draw some lines across the grey areas of domain shared between them.

Chapter 3, 'The Women in the Well', concentrates predominantly on the references to the *nornir* found in *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning* but also looks



further at related supernatural beings. A central theme is the idea of the well or spring as a place of origin for the beings concerned, and this chapter also suggests a reason why the concept of fate tends so strongly to be portrayed as feminine.

Chapter 4, ‘Fate and Threads’, explores the well-established image of fate represented through spinning and weaving. It is found that the Norse material itself provides very few examples of supernatural textile workers, and the discussion centres on whether this image was native to Old Norse tradition and how it relates to the *nornir*.

Chapter 5, ‘Fate, Honour and Speech’, delves into the relationship between fate and law and considers what it means to regard fate as a kind of law. A central part of the discussion is taken up by the links between speech and prophecy. Issues of honour and revenge in particular turn out to be relevant to an understanding of what the *nornir* represent in the Old Norse world view and this chapter seeks to explain why that is.

As mentioned above, the four main chapters of the book treat subject areas that intertwine in numerous ways and, while an attempt has been made to establish a clear focus for each chapter, the reader will find that there are overlaps between them.

Quotations from the *Edda* follow Neckel (1962), and those from *Snorra-Edda* follow Faulkes’ editions (Snorri Sturluson, 1998, 2005a); chapter numbering of *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* follows Snorri Sturluson (2005a) and Snorri Sturluson (1998) respectively. Where nothing else is stated, translations are my own. For eddic poems, my starting point has been Carolyne Larrington’s translations (1996), though I have felt the need to make some changes to them. For skaldic poetry, the Skaldic Project home page ([skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php](http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php)) and *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning* have been my starting point, but translations have been amended when this was thought to be necessary. Whenever possible, quotations are taken from texts that contain the relevant poetry rather than from editions containing only the poetry. Normalised spelling will be used (*kvað* rather than *qvað*, *skuld* rather than *sculd*, etc.), except when citing from editions that use other spellings.

All quotations in languages other than English are translated. Old Norse words, and also modern Scandinavian ones, are used for several concepts and beings as there are no suitable English equivalents. Old Norse

## Introduction

distinguishes between the vowels  $\varphi$  and  $\emptyset$ , whereas modern Icelandic uses  $\ddot{o}$  for both; this is reflected in quotations from Old Norse and from Icelandic.

Much of this book is based on research carried out for my PhD thesis, which I wrote at the University of Edinburgh between 2003 and 2007. Since then, my thoughts have developed and changed, in some cases subtly, in other cases radically, and I am pleased to have this opportunity to re-evaluate my initial research. On the basis of the research presented here, I advance an analysis and explanation of the role or roles played by the *nornir* in Old Norse mythology and tradition.

## Sources

Dealing with the *nornir* means working predominantly, though not exclusively, with literary sources. However, some consideration must first be given to the term *nornir* and the ways in which it is used in the relevant texts. The primary aim of the discussion presented below is to get to grips with the nature of the *nornir* in the Old Norse sources that portray them, but it is evident that the beings referred to under this label do not necessarily constitute a uniform category; in other words, different texts may apply the term in different ways. Likewise, ideas about what *nornir* are seem to undergo some development from the earliest skaldic and eddic references to late medieval texts. This means that understanding the contents and context of the various poems and prose texts that mention *nornir* is of importance.

The language in some of the relevant texts has been dated to as early as ad 900 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1962, p. 406; Dronke, 1969, pp. 42–5, 214–17), whereas other texts have been dated to around 1200 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1962, p. 528; Dronke, 1969, p. 111), though none were written down until 1250 or later; thus, the age that can be attached to linguistic forms in the texts need not reflect the age of the manuscripts that contain them. In turn, neither of these need necessarily reflect the age of the narrative contents and meanings. This leaves a span of some 400 years or more during which changes to ideas about what *nornir* are may have occurred, changes which may or may not be reflected in the texts as they exist in the extant versions.

In modern Icelandic, the common meaning of *norn* is ‘witch’ or ‘hag’. This connection will be touched on occasionally, but there are important distinctions between fate and witchcraft and the *nornir* that are treated here are representatives of fate — they are not witches or workers of magic. This confusion between fate and magic seems to go back a long time and there are some early references that seem to indicate an involvement of the *nornir* with magic. Of course it is possible for the two notions of fate and witchcraft

to exist side by side (and they do so in Old Norse), but, as will become clear, fate and witchcraft are essentially different. Modern Icelandic has two compound nouns that distinguish between, on the one hand, *örlaganornir*, ‘fate-nornir’, and, on the other hand, *galdranornir*, ‘witch-nornir’ (neither term is ever used in Old Norse texts) and *töfranornir*, ‘sorcery-nornir’ (which occurs once in Old Norse; see Chapter 3, note 32) (Arngrímur Sigurðsson, 1983, pp. 235, 812, 919). This book concerns the (*örlaga*-)nornir, who deal with fate, not witches (*galdranornir* or *töfranornir*), who are more concerned with sorcery and magic.

In addition to the term *nornir*, the term *urðr* will be treated as very central to the arguments presented below due to the close semantic links between *nornir* and *Urðarbrunnr* (see 3.1), and because *urðr* is at times employed directly as the name of a *norn* or as a term more or less synonymous with *norn* (see 3.1.1).

The present chapter discusses the sources that refer directly to the *nornir* and which must therefore be regarded as the main sources of information; that is, texts that employ the words *norn* and/or *urðr* or any forms thereof.

Most of the literature relevant to discussions about the *nornir* stems from medieval Iceland. The large majority of references to the *nornir* occur in the *Edda* (also known as the *Poetic Edda*), in *Snorra-Edda* (also known as *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*) and in skaldic poetry. *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders), *Konungasögur* (sagas of the kings) and *fornaldarsögur* (sagas of ancient times) are also relevant, although mostly in less direct ways.

### 1.1 *Edda*

The *Edda* is an anonymous collection of Old Norse mythological and heroic poetry, which is found in a number of different manuscripts. The earliest preserved manuscript, *Konungsbók* (Gks 2365 4<sup>o</sup>),<sup>1</sup> dates from c.1270, but some of the eddic poems are also preserved in the manuscripts *Hauksbók* (AM 544 4<sup>o</sup>),<sup>2</sup> c.1300–25; AM 748 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1300–25; AM 242 fol., c.1350; *Flateyjarbók* (Gks 1005 fol.), c.1387–95, and others.<sup>3</sup>

In editions of the *Edda*, the poems usually follow the order in which they appear in *Konungsbók*,<sup>4</sup> with the mythological poems about the Old Norse gods coming before the heroic ones about legendary heroes; additionally, a number of poems that are not in *Konungsbók*, but are nonetheless

considered eddic, are often included in modern editions of the *Edda*: *Baldrs draumar* (AM 748 4<sup>o</sup>), *Rígsþula* (AM 242 fol.), *Hyndluljóð* (*Flateyjarbók*), *Grottasöngur* (Gks 2367 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1300–50) and sometimes also *Grógaldur* and *Fjölsvinnsmál*. The last two (at times regarded as one poem under the title *Svipdagsmál*) are preserved only in paper manuscripts from the seventeenth century (Gísli Sigurðsson, 1998, p. 419),<sup>5</sup> and they have often been regarded as too late to be of value to studies of eddic poetry (although see Heide, 1997). However, they are included here, as is another late poem, *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, because it and *Fjölsvinnsmál* employ the terms *nornir* and *urðr* respectively.

The *Edda*, with its poems about ancient heroes, heathen gods, cosmogony and eschatology, is invaluable to our understanding of Old Norse mythology. It should, however, be understood that the number of stories about mythical and legendary figures was never finite and the *Edda* manuscripts are not representative of a ‘holy book’ like the Bible. In the oral tradition underlying the written accounts, there would have been variant versions of any one story with each storyteller telling it his or her own way to suit each new occasion (Harris, 1985, pp. 111–16; McKinnell, 1994, pp. 22–7; Gunnell, 1995, p. 182). In this way, a story did not necessarily have one solid form. It received its exact shape only as it was being told, and it may have taken a more or less different shape each time. Over time, stories are likely to have changed, migrated, been adapted, have taken new ideas on board as well as preserved or dropped old ones and, alongside this, new stories could always be added to the repertoire (McKinnell, 1994, pp. 20–7). Influences from other regions and cultures probably came in during all stages of both the heathen and the Christian eras — through trade, travel and general interaction between Norse and other cultures. It should not be imagined that Old Norse mythology, world view and traditions were ever static; culture is a continuous process, not a finished product.

The *Edda* presents us with a number of stories that seem to contain narrative motifs and linguistic forms from various periods of time, which means that it is difficult to date these stories precisely. Although linguistic forms can be dated to certain periods, this tells us little about the age of the contents of any given story, and discussions about the age of eddic poems are ongoing. The stories that have been preserved may be but a fraction of what once existed — we will never know how much has been lost, but we

can use the surviving narratives to get an impression of what the greater whole was probably like.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 *Snorra-Edda*

*Snorra-Edda* is different in nature from the *Edda*, although it treats some of the same material. It is ascribed to the Icelander Snorri Sturluson (hence the name *Snorra-Edda*, ‘Snorri’s *Edda*’) who supposedly wrote it down around 1220, but the earliest surviving manuscripts of the work date from the fourteenth century (Faulkes, 1993, p. 601; Gunnell, 2005, p. 83).<sup>7</sup> *Snorra-Edda* is essentially a handbook of Old Norse poetics that falls into four main parts: *Prologus* (‘Prologue’), which gives two explanations for heathenism as a whole — a nature-worship model for the phenomenon of religion among peoples who had lost the tradition of the single true God, and a euhemeristic one in which the Old Norse *æsir* deceive people into thinking that they are deities; *Gylfaginning* (‘Delusion of Gylfi’), which relates mythological tales; *Skáldskaparmál* (‘Language of Poetry’), which discusses different poetic forms; and *Háttatal* (‘List of Verse Forms’), a poem praising King Hákon and Skúli hertogi and employing different variations on the basic skaldic and eddic metres.<sup>8</sup> *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* are particularly relevant here. Three manuscripts contain the complete *Snorra-Edda*: *Uppsalaþók* (DG 11), c.1300–25, Gks 2367 4º, c.1300–50, and AM 242 fol., c.1350. It also exists in *Tréktarbók* or *Codex Trajectinus*, c.1600, which is probably copied from an earlier manuscript (Snorri Sturluson, 2005a, p. xxviii). Three other manuscripts contain parts of *Snorra-Edda*: AM 748 Ib 4º, c.1300–25, AM 748 II 4º, c.1400, and AM 757 a 4º, c.1400.<sup>9</sup>

Snorri’s apparent intention with his book was largely to preserve knowledge of the old vernacular poetry for contemporary and future poets (Krömmelbein, 1992, p. 113; Snorri Sturluson, 2005a, p. xvi), making it a valuable source for Old Norse mythology. In particular, he goes some way to explaining many kennings or poetical metaphors by telling the stories that gave rise to them, and in several cases we would not otherwise have been able to understand what these kennings refer to, nor would we have known the stories. Snorri’s carefully laid out literary construction of a series of illusions enables him to some extent to relate the stories as if they were being told from a heathen viewpoint — probably because he had to present the stories without distortion, as far as he could, if young poets were to

understand the language of their predecessors. *Snorra-Edda* is not, however, an uncomplicated source because, although it preserves much knowledge about heathen mythological matters, it was written down by a Christian over two centuries after Christianity became the state religion of Iceland in 999 or 1000 (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 1999, pp. 9–10). This means that the view presented is that of an outsider — Snorri’s description began in representation, not first-hand experience, as the material was handed down to him through an increasingly thick layer of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> At times, it is evident that Snorri is rationalising his material, organising it into patterns that fit his own contemporary period but are not necessarily representative of earlier periods,<sup>11</sup> and this must be taken into account (Snorri Sturluson, 2005a, p. xxvii).<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3 Skaldic Poetry

Skaldic poetry consists of poems composed by Norse poets from Viking and early medieval times, roughly between ad 800 and ad 1300. Of these poets, names and approximate dates of death (and sometimes also birth) are often known. Broadly speaking, skaldic poems differ from eddic poems by being non-anonymous and occasional rather than traditional (Frank, 1985, p. 159). The skaldic poems that survive were preserved in oral memory, some for centuries, before being committed to writing. Although the tight rules of composition for skaldic poetry, with alliteration, rhyme and metre serving as aide-mémoire (Jónas Kristjánsson, 1988, pp. 84–8; Clunies Ross, 2005, pp. 13–39), must have helped to preserve many original features, it should not be assumed that the extant wording of any poem represents exactly what the poet composed (Jónas Kristjánsson, 1992, p. 109).

Skaldic poems are preserved in various *Konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur* where they are commonly presented as spoken by the poets themselves in the contexts they were supposedly composed in. Snorri, in *Skáldskaparmál*, refers to numerous pieces of skaldic poetry as evidence for the use of the kennings he discusses, though he also quotes some poems in full, or at least extensive, forms.

Two important features of skaldic poetry are the language of kennings or poetic metaphors and the extensive use of *heiti* or synonyms (Frank, 1985, pp. 163–72). Kennings can be relatively simple, for example referring to gold as ‘Freyja’s tears’; in order to understand the metaphor, all that

is required is knowledge of the mythological motif of Freyja weeping tears of gold. But kennings can also be much denser, for example referring to gold as ‘Fróði’s servants’ seed’, where one has to know not only who Fróði is (a legendary king said to have lived during a period of great prosperity), but also who his servants were (two maidens of *jötunn* [giant] descent who were the only ones that could work Fróði’s magical mill) and what their seed was (the gold ground by the mill; *Skáldskaparmál* 43–4). Making up complex kennings was very much part of the skaldic art and it is not unusual to come across stanzas where several simple nouns (such as ‘gold’, ‘sword’ or ‘woman’) have been replaced by metaphors so that there is a whole string of such pieces of circumlocution, all piling on top of each other and all intertwining into one greater meaning. Similarly, the use of *heiti* serves to make the poetry more elaborate, for example in the many alternative names for Óðinn — Grímr, Fiqlnir, Valföðr, Heriann and many more (*Grímnismál* 46–9) — even to the extent that the name Óðinn is itself rarely used when he is mentioned in skaldic poetry.

The impression created by such poetry is that it forms a certain register of speech almost akin to a code language where only those initiated into the craft could compose such verses, and at times even understand them. Many kennings are transparent, because the stories behind them have been preserved, but there are also many that remain unintelligible.<sup>13</sup>

Also relevant are the *pulur*. These are essentially metrical lists of names and words that supplement the section on *heiti* at the end of *Skáldskaparmál*, including lists of names and synonyms for simple nouns such as man, woman, bird, ship, sword, *jötunn* and so on. The term *pulur* (f. pl.) is related to *pulr* (m. sg.), a word used in poetry to denote a wise man or poet (LP, p. 650).<sup>14</sup> The *pulur* preserved in *Snorra-Edda* vary between the different manuscripts, and some of them are probably later additions.<sup>15</sup>

#### 1.4 Sagas

Saga literature constitutes a different kind of source altogether. The *nornir* make extremely few appearances in the prose texts of sagas, as is the case also for other supernatural beings. Nonetheless, the sagas do contain much material that is relevant for an understanding of the culture that produced the concept of *nornir* in the first place, and for this reason they are important to the present exploration.



The term ‘saga’ covers a wide range of narrative styles, from socially realistic accounts of more or less historical persons in familiar environments to more fantastic expeditions into mythical lands inhabited by supernatural creatures of various kinds. Of greatest interest to the present theme are *Íslendingasögur*, most of which were written down in Iceland during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but which purport to describe the period from the settlement of Iceland until after Christianity was accepted there, that is the late 800s until c.1100 (Jónas Kristjánsson, 1988, pp. 203–98; Vésteinn Ólason, 1998, pp. 17–37).<sup>16</sup> Equally relevant are *fornaldarsögur*, written down in Iceland between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century, which tell legendary stories of great heroes from the ancient past and are often based on material similar to that of the heroic poems in the *Edda* (Torfi H. Tulinius, 2005, p. 449).<sup>17</sup>

Whereas the *Íslendingasögur*, with moderate amounts of supernatural elements, give believable accounts of Iceland and its inhabitants during the country’s early history with occasional involvement of people and affairs in mainland Scandinavia<sup>18</sup> and the British Isles, *fornaldarsögur* delve into the more remote past and give much more fantastic accounts of superhuman heroes from bygone eras, their journeys into otherworldly places and meetings with trolls, giants, elves and the like. Both types of sagas yield information about the norms and concepts of the heathen Scandinavian past, but they do so in different ways. *Fornaldarsögur* are less strict in their concern for historical reality, whereas *Íslendingasögur* are somewhat more ethnographic in their portrayal of the past.<sup>19</sup>

Of some relevance, too, is *Sturlunga saga*. This is a compilation of so-called contemporary sagas that were written down shortly after the events they deal with, namely those taking place in Iceland during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a period of great political upheaval on a national scale, the result of which was the loss of Icelandic independence to the Norwegian crown in 1262–64 (Úlfar Bragason, 2005).<sup>20</sup>

### 1.5 Other Sources

In addition to the extant Icelandic literature, many other sources for knowledge about the Old Norse conceptual world exist. I will discuss briefly those relevant to a study of the *nornir*.

The work of Saxo Grammaticus is one such source. Saxo was a well-educated clerk to the Danish archbishop Absalon in the latter part of the twelfth

century. He was commissioned by the Danish king Valdemar the Great and by Absalon to write a history of the Danish people, essentially to give the Danes a heroic past to live up to while simultaneously promoting patriotism and loyalty to King Valdemar. Thus, Saxo's agenda was highly political. A major challenge for Saxo was to turn clearly heathen figures from ancient times into 'noble heathens' to whom medieval Christians could somehow relate. In order to maintain this difficult balance, he frequently steps into the narrative with his own voice and explains (or explains away) any motivation or behaviour unacceptable to a Christian audience. The work is generally known as *Gesta Danorum* ('The Deeds of the Danish People'), though it is uncertain what title Saxo himself gave it.<sup>21</sup> The first half of Saxo's work especially, which deals with the legendary history of Denmark, is of interest in the present context, because it concerns the heathen period. The latter half of *Gesta Danorum* constitutes a rather more historically reliable account of the early medieval kings of Denmark covering the period up until 1182.

Saxo's style shows that he was well versed in Roman literature (Friis-Jensen, 1981; Saxo Grammaticus, 2005, pp. 30–1), and this clearly influences his representation of traditional Norse narratives. He wrote in Latin rather than in the vernacular, which gives the text a deliberately classicising tone. It also means that all native terms are translated into what Saxo considered to be the Latin equivalents; in effect, then, beings such as the *nornir* can be difficult to recognise.<sup>22</sup>

Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* ('The Deeds of the Hamburg Bishops'), dating from c.1070 (Adam of Bremen, 2000, pp. 10–11), which is also in Latin, is a description of the history and geography of the lands and peoples to the north of Hamburg–Bremen, in other words mainland Scandinavia. Adam's descriptions in Book 4 of heathen rituals supposedly taking place in Uppsala touch on aspects of the Old Norse thought-world relevant to this book; the setting with a sacred spring beneath a tree of unknown kind especially recalls Snorri's descriptions of Urðarbrunnr beneath Yggdrasill. Whether Adam's is a first-hand account is uncertain. Moreover, he is not objective in his views — nor should he, a Christian church historian, be expected to provide objective views on heathen traditions. He is rather keener to make clear how horrible the rituals are than to understand exactly what they consist in. Furthermore, he has a political agenda, which adds some significant bias to the narrative

in general, namely the Hamburg–Bremen see’s claim to authority over the Scandinavian churches. Adam’s account survives in a number of manuscripts from *c.*1200 and later (Adam of Bremen, 2000, pp. 38–9).<sup>23</sup>

Two works by the Roman historian and consul Cornelius Tacitus (*c.* ad 56–117; Tacitus, 1970 [1948], p. 9) have some relevance and will be referred to occasionally. Although Tacitus is 1,000 years earlier than most of the other sources discussed here, and although things may have changed a lot during that period, his works may at times be used as supporting evidence. *Germania* (ad 98; Tacitus, 1970 [1948], p. 25) is a kind of ethnographic description of the Germanic tribes of his time, although it is by no means an objective account, but one that is as much a comment on the Rome of his own time as it is one on the Germans. *Historia* (*c.* ad 109; Tacitus, 1997, p. xl) is a work on Roman history covering the period between *c.* ad 68 and *c.* ad 96. Of particular relevance are Books 4 and 5, which deal with the Germanic peoples. *Germania* survives in manuscripts from the fifteenth century (Tacitus, 1970 [1948], p. 153) and *Historia* in manuscripts from the eleventh century (Tacitus, 1997, p. xxxi). Although Tacitus should not be assumed to have had first-hand knowledge of his material, but probably to have obtained information from people who had visited the relevant regions or came from there, he nonetheless provides valuable insights into early Germanic culture. His descriptions of Germanic seeresses especially are of interest to a discussion of the *nornir*. As with the other source material, it must be kept in mind that Tacitus’ reasons for writing his works rarely coincide with our reasons for reading them.<sup>24</sup>

Some archaeological evidence is also relevant to the present research, especially two runic inscriptions from medieval Norway. Inscription IV from the stave church at Borgund and an inscribed wooden stick from Søndre Engelgården at Bryggen in Bergen, both of which specifically use the word *nornir*, have obvious relevance — not because they necessarily provide any evidence of continued belief in the *nornir*, but because they show a continuation in the use of the term, which closely matches that employed in the literary traditions.<sup>25</sup>

## 1.6 Evaluation

Most of the literary sources for Old Norse mythology stem from Iceland, which means that they may well be casting a specifically North Atlantic light

on matters. It would be naïve to think that all ideas that existed in Iceland had exact equivalents across Scandinavia or that Iceland can be taken as representative of what was going on in Denmark, Norway or Sweden; the Old Norse cultural area covers a vast geographical area with many different types of landscape, climate, geology and conditions, and it spans a chronological period of some three centuries or more. Imagining any great degree of uniformity or taking one specific place as representative of what was happening elsewhere, or even of the entire region, would be a mistake. The Old Norse belief system should probably be conceived of in the plural, as several systems, all of which were variations on similar themes. This is a point that has been made by several scholars over the past decade and more (McKinnell, 1994; Lindow, 1997; DuBois, 1999), but there is no harm done in making it again here.

Among all the sources mentioned above, there are none that aim specifically to explain in any neutral ethnographic sense the norms and world views held by people in Scandinavia during the late Iron Age (c.600–800) into the early Middle Ages (c.1100–1300). A few documents move in this direction,<sup>26</sup> but such as exist are all written from the perspective of other cultures so that the authors themselves were not entirely *au fait* with what they were describing. Literature from inside Scandinavia all comes from the Christian period so that it still does not give an insider's view, but a later tinged recollection of what once was.

In terms of evaluating the different sources, when the aim is a deeper and better understanding of the *nornir* as these were conceived of in the Viking Age (c.800-1100), I have not found any one consistent method of treatment for all of the information. Different pieces of evidence call for different kinds of considerations and this is reflected in the discussion that follows. The research presented here is not intended to constitute the final academic word on the *nornir* — rather, the feeling is that it makes a start in terms of treating the *nornir* as the focal point of extensive research. The intention is to look at the concepts and ideas that lie behind the extant source material in order to bring about a better understanding of these figures than has hitherto been current. Hopefully, the findings presented below can serve as a base for future research on the *nornir*.

## Notes to Chapter 1

- 1 *Konungsbók* (also known as *Codex Regius*) is not just one MS. The name refers to a collection of MSS presented to the Danish king, Frederik III, in 1662 (hence the name ‘King’s Book’), but different MSS of the compilation have been dated to different periods. Here, the name *Konungsbók* is applied specifically to Gks 2365 4<sup>o</sup>, which is the part usually designated by that name. Other parts of the compilation will be referred to by their MS numbers.
- 2 Here, the name *Hauksbók* is used specifically to refer to AM 544 4<sup>o</sup>; other parts of this compilation will be referred to by their MS numbers.
- 3 Whenever possible, dates for Norse MSS are taken from *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* (1989). However, several *Konungasögur* are not listed in this index. In cases where MSS are known by a name as well as a number, the name is used (see the list of manuscripts for the MS numbers).
- 4 See *Codex Regius of the Elder Edda* (1937) for this; the order is different in other MSS that contain some of the same poems.
- 5 See Gísli Sigurðsson (1998, p. xii) for an overview of which eddic poems occur in which MSS.
- 6 Further on eddic poetry, see Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1962); Harris (1983, 1985); Jónas Kristjánsson (1988); McKinnell (1994); Fijestøl (1999); Clunies Ross (2005); Gunnell (2005).
- 7 Snorri’s authorship appears to be verified by a comment in DG 11 (Snorri Sturluson, 1987, p. vi; Krömmelbein, 1992, p. 113).
- 8 While these four sections are now recognised as constituting *Snorra-Edda*, it should be noted that, in the MSS containing them, these texts are interspersed with other material not normally included in editions of *Snorra-Edda*.
- 9 Generally speaking, modern editors of *Snorra-Edda* silently correct and amend the text, drawing on various MSS. For discussions of Snorri’s authorship, see Faulkes (1983) and Krömmelbein (1992).
- 10 Pernille Hermann (2009, pp. 295–9) has recently discussed this particular issue.
- 11 As Schjødtt states, no literary creation is so unique that its author has been unaffected by the ideology of his own culture, and no traditional tale is so traditional that its teller does not bring some of his own personality into it. The trick is for us to find out which of these voices surfaces at any given point (2009, pp. 172–4).
- 12 Further on *Snorra-Edda*, see especially Kure (2010), and also Snorri Sturluson (1987, 1998, 2005a); Krömmelbein (1992); Úlfar Bragason (1992); Faulkes (1993); Guðrún Nordal (2001).
- 13 Further on skaldic poetry, see Turville-Petre (1976); Frank (1985); Clunies Ross (1987, 2005); Jónas Kristjánsson (1988); Guðrún Nordal (2001); O’Donoghue (2005); Whaley (2005).
- 14 Clunies Ross (2006, pp. 34–8) discusses the differences between the *pulr* and the *skáld*, where the *pulr* represents an older type of poet (associated with accumulated traditional wisdom) and the *skáld* represents a more modern type of poet, working under the patronage of a ruler.
- 15 Further on *pulur*, see Halvorsen (1976); Gurevich (1992); Simek (1993, pp. 331–2).
- 16 Further on *Íslendingasögur*, see Meulengracht Sørensen (1983); Clover (1985); Miller (1990); Gísli Sigurðsson (2004).
- 17 Further on *fornaldarsögur*, see Jónas Kristjánsson (1988, pp. 341–62); Mitchell (1991);

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- 18 By 'Scandinavia' I mean Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, including Orkney and Shetland as well as Norse Greenland, and by 'mainland Scandinavia' I mean Denmark, Norway and Sweden.
- 19 Whenever possible, *Íslendingasögur* and *Konungasögur* will be quoted from the *Íslenzk Fornrit* series (ÍF). *Fornaldarsögur* are quoted from *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* (FSN) unless otherwise stated.
- 20 Further on *Sturlunga saga*, see Jónas Kristjánsson (1988, pp. 188–202).
- 21 The only surviving MS of the complete work is a version printed in Paris in 1512; exactly how much is Saxo's own and how much may be the work of later editors is somewhat uncertain (Boserup, 1981, pp. 9–11).
- 22 Further on Saxo, see Saxo Grammaticus (1979–80); Boserup (1981); Friis-Jensen (1981, 1987, 2000).
- 23 Further on Adam, see Hultgård (1997); Adam of Bremen (2000, pp. 9–41; 2002 [1959]).
- 24 Further on Tacitus, see Tacitus (1970 [1948], 1997).
- 25 Further on runes, see Olsen (1957); Page (1987); McKinnell *et al.* (2004).
- 26 For example Ibn Fadlan's description of a Viking funeral somewhere on the Volga (Foote and Wilson, 1980, pp. 408–11; Ström, 1985 [1961], pp. 209–13; Jesch, 1991, pp. 119–23; Roesdahl, 1996 [1987], pp. 168–9).

## What Is a Norn?

The role and identity of the *nornir* are inextricably bound up with the notion of fate and, therefore, a discussion of the *nornir* must also include a discussion of the concept of fate. However, an answer to the question of what fate means is not all that simple to come by because the concept is cultural, not natural, and as such it is culturally and historically specific and subject to changes over time and through space. In the case of Old Norse tradition, fate or destiny is a widely employed notion that is referred to in many situations, most of which do not involve the *nornir* directly. It should be pointed out that the *nornir*, rather than fate, form the focus here, which means that many references to fate will be left out of the discussion if no direct link to this particular (or any other) group of female supernatural beings is apparent.

The *nornir* make relatively few appearances in *Edda* and *Snorra-Edda* and rather fewer outside these. Partly because of the comparatively small number of references, partly because they overlap significantly with certain other kinds of supernatural beings, it makes little sense to look at the *nornir* as an isolated group of beings and, although it must form the basis of any exploration, it would be overly confining to focus exclusively on the term *nornir*. The term *urðr* is particularly important to consider as well because *urðr* is used to describe the spring or well of Urðarbrunnr, which is a place closely linked to the *nornir*, and because *Urðr* is at times given as the name of a *norn*.

This chapter pays more attention to occurrences of the term *nornir*, while *urðr* will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 3. The two terms are, on some levels, apparently interchangeable, but there is a difference in the contexts in which they occur — *urðr* being much more frequently associated with Urðarbrunnr than *nornir* — and *urðr* will be discussed primarily in connection with this spring or source of water. While it must be remembered that *heiti* and the notion of a set of interchangeable words constitute

a fundamental principle in skaldic poetry, it must also be maintained that, at root, separate terms refer to separate semantic contents — much like the terms ‘woman’, ‘lady’, ‘girl’, ‘wife’ and ‘maiden’ overlap without referring to the exact same meaning. The fact that the *nornir* do overlap with other categories has led to them often being treated in scholarship as a subsection under a broader heading that includes several types of beings. The focus has rarely been on the *nornir* as a separate entity with its own function and identity, and this in spite of the fact that they are said to be *kanske den mest välkände gruppen av kvinnliga gestalter med anknytning till ödet* (perhaps the best known group of female beings linked to fate) (Raudvere, 2003, pp. 62–3). Scholars have most often opted either for brevity or for more inclusive discussions of female supernatural beings in general — and here the circle closes, as this is primarily due to the fact that the *nornir* are so rarely discussed in their own right.<sup>1</sup>

It is not wrong as such to consider the *nornir* to be part of a larger group of female supernatural beings and there are several reasons why this way of dealing with them is perfectly acceptable in more general contexts: the *nornir* are not mentioned as often as other supernatural female figures, there is little evidence of any formal cult attached to them and, shadowy as they are, it is simply difficult to get a clear view of the substance lurking behind the term *nornir*. Yet it is still possible to reach a deeper understanding of these beings if they are treated as the central subject of investigation — as will become apparent.

## 2.1 *Nornir, Dísir and Valkyrjur*

What follows is a discussion of the similarities and differences between the *nornir* and their closest supernatural relatives with a view to discovering whether there are any ground rules as to where the lines can be drawn between *nornir*, *dísir* and *valkyrjur*, with some attention also given to other female supernatural beings, namely *ásynjur*, *fylgjur* [fetches] and *völur* [seeresses]. It is important to realise that the source material is diverse and that meanings of words and concepts may well have varied over time and in space; the word *nornir* in some of the oldest skaldic and eddic poems (supposedly from as early as the tenth century) may refer to something more or less different from *nornir* in late medieval *fornaldarsögur* from two, three or even four centuries later — even if both the poetry and the prose comes



from the same geographical location (Gunnell, 2004a [2000], pp. 118–20). This makes it somewhat complicated to deal with the sources, because the mere fact that the same word is used in different texts — even when not used as a *heiti* — does not guarantee that separate occurrences of *nornir* or *dísir* or *valkyrjur* actually refer to the same semantic content.

This book will not treat every category of beings that intertwine with the *nornir* exhaustively — to do so would require a rather more extensive work than this one.

### 2.1.1 *Nornir*

Skaldic references to the *nornir* often associate them with transitional situations, typically with violent death or with battle, but different sources nonetheless emphasise different aspects of their nature.

In a *lausavísa* [occasional stanza] by the saga character Kveldúlfur in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* 24,<sup>2</sup> supposedly composed in 880 or 890 (ÍF, Vol. 2, p. lii), Kveldúlfur laments the loss of his son Þórólfr, who has died in battle:<sup>3</sup>

Nú frák norðr í eyju,  
norn erum grimm, til snimma  
Þundr<sup>4</sup> kaus þremja skyndi,  
Þórólfr und lok fóru;  
létumk þung at þingi  
Þórs fangvina<sup>5</sup> at ganga,  
skjótt munat hefnt, þótt hvettimk  
hugr, malm-Gnáar brugðit.  
(ÍF, Vol. 2, p. 60)

✚

I have heard that up north in an island,  
[the/a] norn is grim to me,  
Óðinn chose him much too soon,  
Þórólfr has met his end;  
the heaviness of old age  
has robbed me of my fighting strength,  
revenge will not come quickly  
though not for the lack of wanting.

What is stressed in this verse is a strong sense of personal tragedy on the part of the father who has lost his son. However, it is equally important to

note that Kveldúlfur says that: '[the/a] *norn* is grim to me', whereas nothing is said about her being grim to Þórólfr — although she seems to have been present at the place where Þórólfr was killed, not where Kveldúlfur is, which apparently suggests a concept nearer to that of *valkyrjur*, who select the worthy warriors. There is, in fact, also a strong sense that Þórólfr has been chosen by Óðinn, presumably as a worthy warrior, thus lending a heroic slant to the otherwise tragic event. Kveldúlfur may therefore be expressing a certain amount of pride alongside his sorrow and frustrated desire for revenge.

Kveldúlfur employs the term *norn* in the singular, but whether he believes there to be only one *norn* (warranting the translation 'the *norn*') or whether he is singling out one from a larger group (giving the translation 'a *norn*') is unclear and it is not possible from this verse alone to determine which would be the more correct translation.

A noteworthy detail is the occurrence of a/the *norn* and Óðinn together and the notion that both are involved in the death of Þórólfr. The two figures are clearly thought of as closely connected here. Still, it is possible to detect a division whereby Óðinn, in selecting Þórólfr, is responsible for his death whereas the *norn* is responsible for the grief experienced by the father of the dead warrior. If this is correct, then it can be said that Óðinn has caused the death while the *norn* has caused the emotional turmoil.

A somewhat different aspect of the *nornir* is portrayed in a *lausavísa* by Torf-Einarr, supposedly dating from c.890, in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* 30:<sup>6</sup>

Rekit hefk Rognvalds dauða,  
rétt skiptu því nornir,  
nú 's folkstuðill fallinn,  
at fjorðungi mínum.  
Verpið, snarpir sveinar,  
því sigri vér ráðum,  
skatt velk honum harðan,  
at Háfætu<sup>7</sup> grjóti.  
(ÍF, Vol. 26, p. 132)

✚

I have avenged Rognvaldr's death,  
the nornir settled it right,

my quarter-part in it;  
now the warrior has fallen.  
Brave men, throw —  
for victory is ours;  
it is a hard tax that I take from him,  
— stones up around Háfætr.

Although this scene, too, concerns a battle wherein men have been killed, Torf-Einarr's verse conveys a feeling that he is rejoicing in, rather than regretting, the involvement of the *nornir* because they have 'settled it right'<sup>8</sup> and because he has won the battle. Apart from death on the battlefield, the verse also concerns a legal dispute between Torf-Einarr and his half-brothers over the inheritance from their father, and Torf-Einarr is out to promote his own right to a share in that inheritance in spite of his status as illegitimate son of Røgnvaldr, a theme repeated in other texts discussed below (see *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*). It is significant that he refers to the *nornir* in such a context, as if they concern themselves not only with the warring side of matters but also with the legal side — or at least with justice, regardless of the law.

The verb *skipta*, cognate with the English 'shift', employed in this *lausavísa* has several nuances of meaning — 'to change, exchange; to shift, replace' — but it can also mean 'to bring to an end' (Frtz, Vol. 3, pp. 342–4) or 'to share equally' (LP, p. 507). This last meaning occurs in modern Danish in the legal context of inheritance, namely the neuter noun *et skifte*, 'administration or distribution of a deceased person's estate'. This aspect of the Old Norse *skipta* seems to be highlighted by the fact that Torf-Einarr refers to his quarter-share in avenging his father, supposedly to be equalled by his quarter-share in the inheritance. The intersection of battle outcome and the decision, judgement or selection made by the *nornir* is repeated elsewhere.

Some other poems use phrases very similar to Torf-Einarr's *rétt skiptu því nornir*, namely *Atlamál* 36, where the last two lines read: *þá hygg ec scōp scipto, scilduz vegir þeira* (then, I think, their fates were settled, when their ways parted), and also lines 1 and 3 of stanza 4 of Ingjaldr Geirmundarson's *Brandsflokkr* in *Þorðar saga kakala* 17:<sup>9</sup> *Skiptu skōp sem optar ... ósvifr fira lífi* (Fate, unkind as more often, parted the men from their lives).<sup>10</sup> It must nonetheless be noted that, in both of these examples, fate is regarded

as being unjust or random, which is different from Torf-Einarr's suggestion that the *normir* have an obligation to be just. In both cases, the verb *skipta* is employed by the subject *skǫp*, that is by the concept 'fate' rather than by the personified *normir*, but the meaning is similar. However, it is possible that Ingjaldr, living in a much later and, not least, Christian period, may be imagining something quite different from Torf-Einarr's conception of the *normir* when he uses the word *skǫp*. If Dronke (1969, p. 111) is correct in dating *Atlamál* to the twelfth century, then perhaps that poem, too, conveys a twelfth-century view of what fate is. What happened to the heathen notion of fate as a powerful, central concept after the coming of Christianity is a separate study altogether; Old English appears to have successfully Christianised some aspects of fate by turning it into 'the will of God'. It seems, however, that Old Norse to a larger extent established a new vocabulary for Christianity rather than recycle heathen concepts (Robinson, 1985, pp. 29–59; Green, 1998, pp. 374–91).

Another skaldic reference to the *normir* turns up in Þjóðólfr ór Hvini's poem *Ynglingatal* 24, apparently from the ninth century, found in *Ynglingasaga* 47:

Ok til þings  
 þriðja jǫfri  
 Hveðrungs mæR  
 ór heimi bauð,  
 þás Halfdan,  
 sás Holtum bjó,  
 norna dóms  
 of notit hafði.  
 Ok buðlung  
 á Borrói  
 sigrhafendr  
 síðan fólu.  
 (ÍF, Vol. 26, p. 79)  
 †  
 And to a meeting<sup>11</sup>  
 Hveðrungr's maid  
 called the third king  
 from the world,

at the time when Halfdan,  
he who lived at Holt,  
had embraced  
the judgement of the nornir;  
and at Borró  
the victorious men  
later did hide  
the king.

The phrase *Pás Halfdan ... norna dóms of notit hafði* (when Halfdan ... had embraced the judgement of the *nornir*) refers to Halfdan's death. The combination of *norna dómr* (judgement of the *nornir*, i.e. 'death') with the verb *njóta* (to have use for, to benefit from, to enjoy; Frtz, s.v.) may look odd at first — exactly how the king 'benefits' from his own death seems unclear — but it is possible to understand *njóta* in a more neutral sense of 'experience' or 'pass through' rather than in the positive sense usually conjured up by the term. The verb *njóta* could then be used to indicate that the death was timely or somehow appropriate. However, *njóta* is employed in a number of late heathen runic inscriptions to refer to the dead man 'enjoying' his monument or mound (McKinnell *et al.*, 2004, pp. 134–5). It can also mean 'to have sexual relations with a person of the opposite gender' (Frtz, s.v.) and, as Hveðrungr is mentioned as an *Óðinsheiti* in *þulur*, it is quite possible to understand *Hveðrungs mæ*r (Óðinn's maid) as an alluring otherworldly woman who is inviting the king to her abode.<sup>12</sup> This would then conjure up a set of positive connotations relating to death in battle. A designation such as 'Óðinn's maid' would probably fit a *valkyrja* rather better than it would a *norn*, but there is no need to assume that *Hveðrungs mæ*r and the *norn* are the same in this stanza. Contrastingly, the kenning *mōgr Hveðrungs* (Hveðrungr's son) in *Völuspá* 55 is understood to refer to Fenrisúlfr, whose father is Loki. In this case, the *heiti* Hveðrungr refers to Loki, not Óðinn. Following this, *Hveðrungs mæ*r in *Ynglingatal* 24 could then equally well refer to Hel, the female ruler of the underworld, whose father is also Loki (Simek, 1993, p. 166; Abram, 2006, p. 16). Either way, *Hveðrungs mæ*r is an otherworldly woman associated with death, and the positively loaded description here seems to draw on the enticing aspects of desirable otherworldly women (Quinn, 2006).

Furthermore, the use of the noun *dómr*, ‘judgement’, in the phrase *norna dómr* (death) brings in a quasi-legal aspect of the dealings of the *nornir*, not unlike the use of *skipta* in Torf-Einarr’s *lausavísa* discussed above (see *Fáfnismál* 44 and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*). This legal metaphor is important, as will become clear below, because it is employed with some frequency in references to the *nornir*.

Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld refers to the *nornir* in an unusual way in *Hallfreðar saga* 6.<sup>13</sup> In a *lausavísa*, supposedly composed c.996, Hallfreðr describes his conversion to Christianity, clearly a transitional point in his life, and this description involves a reference to the *nornir*:

Sás með Sygna ræsi  
siðr, at blót eru kviðjuð;  
verðum flest at forðask  
fornhaldin skop norna;  
láta allir ýtar  
Óðins blót fyr róða;  
verðk ok neyddr frá Njarðar<sup>14</sup>  
nidjum Krist at biðja.  
(ÍF, Vol. 8, p. 159)

✚

Such is the custom at the Sygna-king’s,  
that sacrifice is forbidden;  
most of us must avoid  
the ancient *nornir*’s decisions;  
all men leave behind  
Óðinn’s sacrifice;  
I, too, will be forced from Njörðr’s  
kin to worship Christ instead.

It is interesting that Hallfreðr apparently refers to his former, pagan beliefs as *fornhaldin skop norna* (the ancient *nornir*’s decisions). The fact that he mentions the *nornir* alongside the gods, *æsir* (Óðinn) and *vanir* (Njörðr or Freyr depending on which manuscript is quoted), gives the impression that the *nornir* are as important and central to his former beliefs as are the gods. The *nornir*, however, unlike the gods, apparently did not constitute a group of deities towards whom worship was directed — at least the evidence of any ritual activity connected to the *nornir* is limited to the

*nornagraut* from much later traditions collected in Norway and the Faroe Islands in the nineteenth century (see below). Even so, the *nornir* must have had a prominent place, certainly in Hallfreðr's consciousness, as he seems by *skop norna* to refer to his pagan faith as such (Lindow, 2001, p. 245; Whaley, 2003, pp. 241–2; see 5.2).

In the three skaldic stanzas discussed above, the term *nornir* seems clearly to refer to its own semantic content, so to speak, but the term can also be used to form kennings. This happens in the apparently twelfth-century *Ólafsdrápa Tryggvasonar* 18 (Skj BI, p. 572–AI, pp. 576–7) where *skjaldar norn* (*norn* of the shield) is a kenning for 'axe'. The underlying image is that the axe brings 'death' to the shield. Similar kennings exist that do not mention *nornir* but other supernatural females, such as *Skáldskaparmál* 49, stanza 245: *øx heitir tröllkona hlifa* (axe is called troll-woman of protective armour; Snorri Sturluson, 1987, p. 121). This kenning uses a very similar image with the axe as a troll-woman attacking the protective armour. There are other indications that troll-women and *nornir* were considered to have things in common, such as the runic stick from Søndre Engelgården at Bryggen in Bergen, Norway. The stick (N B145) is thought to date from c.1225–50 (SP) and bears the inscription:

fell til friþrar þ(e)llu farl(e)ghrar m(e)r arla fiskall festibala  
forn byr hamarnorna / þæim (u)ihdi heuir þundar þornluþrs  
(e)olunbuþar gloumar gyghiartouma / kaltrs falkha haldet omnia  
uinsciþ amor æþ nos c(c)itam(m) amori / galdrs fastl(e)gha  
haldet omnia uinciþ amor æþ nos c(e)damus amori

(Normalised: Fell till friðrar þellu / fárligrar mér árla / fiskáls  
festibála / forn byrr hamarnorna. / Þeim lundi hefir þundar /  
þornlúðrs þolunbúðar / glauma gýgjartauma / galdrs fastliga  
haldit. / Omnia vincit Amor, / et nos cedam[us] Amori. / galdrs  
fastliga haldit. / Omnia vincit Amor, / et nos cedamus Amori.)

✚

The ancient wind of the cliff-*nornir* [my thoughts] turned very early for me towards the beautiful, harmful fir-tree [woman] carrying fire [gold] from the deep fish-ground [sea]. They [the thoughts] have been held fast by magic. Love conquers everything, let us surrender to love. held fast by magic. Love conquers everything, let us surrender to love.<sup>15</sup>

This inscription represents a love charm, using the kenning ‘wind of the giantess’ for ‘thought’, and the cliff-*nornir* mentioned here are giantesses or troll-women, ‘*nornir* of the mountains’. The kenning seems to draw on more than just the femininity of the *nornir*, because this way of employing the term also conjures up their threatening and uncontrollable aspects. The text is hard to translate (see note 15), but it is noteworthy that the first clause makes this indirect reference to the *nornir* while the following clause relating to magic involves a kenning referring to a wolf as the steed of a troll-woman (see notes 22 and 23). The relationship between *nornir*, troll-women and wolves is a topic still to be explored more fully.

The skaldic references to the *nornir* bring out several characteristics of this group of female supernatural beings. They are mentioned in the context of death and battle — as harbingers of tragedy (for instance Kveldúlfr) and bringers of death (for instance *Ynglingatal* and Torf-Einarr) — and this connection appears to be very strong. But the skaldic view of the *nornir* is not entirely negative — Torf-Einarr especially has a positive take on them — and the notion that the *nornir* pass judgement and make decisions brings out a juridical or quasi-legal aspect to their collective character.

Another example of this legal vocabulary comes from the legendary *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* 19:<sup>16</sup>

Bǫlvat er okkr, bróðir,  
bani em ek þinn orðinn;  
þat mun æ uppi,  
illr er dómr norna.  
(Jón Helgason, 1924, p. 155)

‡  
We two have been cursed, brother,  
I have become your slayer,  
that will always be so,  
evil is the *nornir*’s judgement.

The situation here is that the two sons of Heiðrekr have battled against each other and Angantýr has killed Hlǫðr, his half-brother. Angantýr, in the above stanza, expresses deep regret for the outcome of the battle and he blames the *nornir* for arranging their lives so that they would fight although they were brothers. Underlying their difficulties are issues concerning the right to inherit from their father. They are sons of separate mothers and Angantýr



has the direct right to inherit, because he has the status of legitimate son. He goes to great lengths to accommodate Hlǫðr's demands but when Hlǫðr hears himself referred to as *þýjar barn* (a bondmaid's child), he feels this as an attack on his honour and sees armed retaliation as the only solution. Angantýr thus ends up killing Hlǫðr in self-defence. The *dómr norna* is again connected to the violent death which is the outcome of the brothers' dispute over inheritance (compare Torf-Einarr), thus drawing together issues of death on the battlefield, tragic fighting within a family and legal matters. In other sources, too, it is common for the *nornir* to be mentioned, or even blamed, when people experience this type of deep crisis brought on by the heavy obligations prescribed by the avenging imperative and the concept of honour.

Eddic references to the *nornir* follow very much in the same vein as the skaldic ones. Some eddic poems reinforce the link between the *nornir* and legal matters by employing similar metaphors to those found in *Ynglingatal* 24 and in Torf-Einarr's *lausavísa*. *Fáfnismál* 11 provides an example:

Norna dóm

þú munt fyr nesiom hafa

oc ósvinnz apa;

i vatni þú drucnar,

ef í vindi rær:

allt er feigs forað.

✚

The judgement of the nornir

you will have out at sea

the way stupid men die;

you will drown in the water

if you row in a wind:

all is dangerous for one who is fey.

The threat of *norna dómr* (the judgement of the *nornir*), which appears to be a blind motif in *Fáfnismál*, is the threat of death, the final and inevitable decision that the *nornir* make with regard to a human life.

*Hamðismál* 30 gives a similar metaphor:

Vel hǫfom við vegit,

stǫndom á val Gotna,

ofan, eggmóðom,<sup>17</sup>

sem ernir á qvisti;  
góðs hofom tírar fengið,  
þótt scylim nú eða í gær deya<sup>18</sup>  
qveld lifir maðr ecci  
eptir qvið norna.<sup>19</sup>

†

We have fought well,  
we stand on Goth corpses,  
weary of sword-edge,  
like eagles on a branch.  
We have won great renown,  
whether we die now or yesterday  
a man does not live out the evening  
after the nornir give their verdict.

This stanza conveys a strong sense of inevitability. The phrase *kviðr norna* (verdict of the *nornir*) means death, and both heroes of the poem, Hamðir and Sqrli, die in the following stanza so that, although they win the fight, they lose their lives — in accordance with the decisions made by the *nornir*. It is noteworthy that the stanza describes a great victory for the two brothers, hinting at the heroic reputation they have gained from this, and the reference to the *nornir*, while coming across as stern and doom-laden, also conveys a feeling of satisfaction with and pride in a task well fulfilled. It may be that Hamðir, who appears to speak this verse, finds that it is worth paying with his life for this reputation.<sup>20</sup>

In both *Fáfnismál* 11 and *Hamðismál* 30, the dealings of the *nornir* are conceived of in legal images — as judgement and verdict. It should be noted that, so far, this survey has included a remarkably high proportion of verses that are thought to be very early in date.

A phrase rather similar to the last two lines of *Hamðismál* 30, but without the legal metaphor, is found in a line from a verse in *Íslendinga saga* 286 [136; 142],<sup>21</sup> namely: *Urðr mun eigi forðask* (no one can escape fate). The verse is spoken by a strange, supernatural woman and occurs as one of many dream visions prior to the battle of Örlygsstaðir in 1238 in Iceland; it conveys a feeling of something ominous and unavoidable, spelling death for men in battle.

*Hamðismál* contains another reference to the *nornir* in that stanza 29 mentions *grey norna* (dogs of the *nornir*), a kenning for wolves:

Ecci hygg ec ocr vera  
úlfa dæmi,  
at vit mynim sjálfir um sacaz,  
sem grey norna,  
þau er gráðug ero,  
í auðn um alin.

✚

I don't think we are to follow  
the wolves' example,  
and fight among ourselves,  
like nornir's dogs,  
those who are greedy,  
reared in the wild.

It describes how ferocious and uncivilised these 'norn-dogs' are (Dronke, 1969, p. 238), apparently pointing at infighting as a cause of evil. This brings to mind the reference to *nornir* in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, which describes such a situation: two brothers fighting against each other, and Sǫrli may be alluding to his and Hamðir's killing of their half-brother Erpr without whose assistance they themselves are now facing death. No other instances link the *nornir* to dogs or wolves<sup>22</sup> but the *grey norna* rather recall *Viðris grey* (Viðrir's dogs), Viðrir being an *Óðinsheiti*, in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 13, describing wolves as beasts of the battlefield.<sup>23</sup>

'Dog' is a standard base kenning for 'wolf', but the reference to dogs can also yield the impression that, as human masters command their dogs, so the *nornir* command people as though they were dogs.<sup>24</sup> In this, Sǫrli, who supposedly speaks the verse, may well be referring back to Hamðir's line in stanza 28 — that the *dísir* urged him to kill Erpr — thus drawing a parallel between the *nornir* and the *dísir*. The *nornir* are not normally portrayed as giving orders directly to people, but their influence on human lives is often described as decision-making or the passing of judgements, processes arguably similar to that of giving orders. In fact, the very direct intervention by supernatural forces — they encourage Hamðir — may be what prompts him to refer to them as *dísir* instead of as *nornir*, because *dísir* generally appear more interactive than *nornir*.

Several other eddic references to the *nornir* clearly draw on the idea of decision-making, even without specifically employing legal terminology.

*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 26 provides an example:

Erat þér at oлло,  
alvitr, gefið  
— þó qveð ec nocqvi  
nornir valda —:  
fello í morgon  
at Frecasteini  
Bragi oc Hqgni  
— varð ec bani þeira.  
⚡  
Things are not, strange creature,  
as you would have them  
— though I say the nornir  
decided some of it —:  
they fell this morning  
at Frekasteinn  
Bragi and Hqgni  
— I became their slayer.

Here, Helgi says to his beloved, Sigrún, that he has killed Bragi and Hqgni, her brother and father, but he also says that the *nornir* decided over some of his actions, as though it were not in his power to do otherwise. The conflict is deeply emotional for both Sigrún and Helgi; the complex circumstances of having loyalties both to their kin and to their love for each other bring them into a situation where all potential ways out will bring tragedy of one sort or another.<sup>25</sup> While Helgi is not afraid of claiming direct responsibility for killing the men, what he regrets is being put in a situation wherein he had to do so if he were not to lose his own life — and that, it seems, is what he blames the *nornir* for. His statement, that ‘the *nornir* decided some of it’, rather recalls Hamðir’s phrase regarding his killing of Erpr that *hvottomc at dísir* (the *dísir* urged me on), and the situation is also somewhat similar to the one surrounding Angantýr and Hlqðr in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* — situations in which men and women feel that they are not acting according to their own wishes but nonetheless feel that they must do what they do, as though they were obeying some kind of law. Often, the central issue appears to be honour (the heroes refuse to back down because they do not want to lose face) but is spoken of in terms of fate (the events are seen as conditioned by the *nornir*; see 5.2).

This happens not just to male but also to female protagonists, such as in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 5–7:

Hon sér at lífi  
lǫst né vissi  
oc at aldragi  
ecci grand,  
vamm þat er væri  
eða vera hygði.  
Gengo þess á milli  
grimmar urðir.

Ein sat hon úti  
aptan dags,  
nam hon svá bert  
um at mælaz:  
'Hafa skal ec Sigurð —  
eða þó svelt! —,  
mög frumungan,  
mér á armi.

Orð mæltac nú  
iðromc eptir þess:  
qván er hans Guðrún,  
enn ec Gunnars;  
liótar nornir  
scópo oss langa þrá!'

†

She had not known  
any wrongdoing in her life  
and no harm  
that would cause death,  
no disgrace that was  
nor that she could think of,  
terrible fates  
intervened in this!

Outside she sat alone  
in the evening,  
then she began  
to speak openly:  
'I shall have Sigurðr,  
or I shall die,  
the young man  
in my arms!

The words I spoke now  
I will regret later,  
Guðrún is his wife  
and I am Gunnarr's;  
loathsome *nornir*  
gave us much yearning!'

The stanzas describe Brynhildr's reaction on discovering that she and Sigurðr have been deceived and their promises to each other have been broken due to the treacherous actions of the Gjúkungar, and to an extent of Sigurðr himself, also portrayed in *Völsungasaga* 30–2.<sup>26</sup> Brynhildr then embarks on a horrific revenge plan and plots the killing of Sigurðr, the man she loves, because he has broken his oath and married another woman and in this way she may even be seen to emulate or fulfil the work begun or outlined by the *nornir*.<sup>27</sup> She acts in accordance with the heroic code of honour, which demands that the deception be avenged unless she is to lose face, but she is very aware of the emotional cost of what she does and she connects this particular consequence to the *nornir*. This recalls the sentiment expressed by Kveldúlf. In some ways, her conception of the *nornir* also goes well with that of Hallfreðr in that he sees them as figures central to the heathen faith, while Brynhildr apparently holds them responsible for the code of honour that requires her to act in the way she does. The *nornir*, as representatives of fate, can therefore be seen as closely connected to issues of honour and integrity, both of which were central to the heathen ideals and behavioural patterns. It was Christianity that brought about the changes to the Old Norse conception of what was morally correct behaviour, just as it did for Hallfreðr in his *lausavísa*.

In the above-quoted stanzas, Brynhildr refers to the *nornir* as *liótar nornir* (loathsome *nornir*), and is thoroughly unhappy about the ways in which they

have arranged circumstances for her and Sigurðr. While she comments on her own innocence, she does not lay the blame for this turn of events on any other person — almost as if the persons involved could not have been expected to act differently. This makes her reference to the *nornir* akin to several other such references in that it works on a rather conceptual level. She laments her situation, recognising it as her reality, but does not get sentimental about it.

The first line of stanza 6, *Ein sat hon úti* (Outside she sat alone) mirrors exactly the first line in *Völuspá* 28 where the *völva* appears to be in the middle of a prophesying ritual and begins to speak in line 4 of the stanza, as does Brynhildr here.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the first two lines of stanza 7, *Orð mæltac nú iðromc eptir þess* (The words I spoke now I will regret later), add to the feeling that Brynhildr is, in fact, conducting some ritual prophecy, albeit one that is painful to herself as she notes already that she will regret it later on. Caught in a situation from which she sees no easy way out, she feels forced to do terrible things; it is in these circumstances that she refers to the dealings of the *nornir*, saying that they ‘gave us much yearning’. Like Kveldúlftr, she stresses the emotional cost.

An interesting term here is *urðir* in stanza 5, which is quite unusual, seemingly a plural of *urðr*, ‘fate’. The word *urðr* occurs infrequently in the nominative form, *urðr* (this happens mainly when it is used as the proper name of one of the *nornir*: Urðr), and is mostly found in the genitive form, *urðar*, attaching itself to something which is a source or form of fate.<sup>29</sup> The above-quoted stanza provides the only example of the plural form *urðir* and it seems to be employed synonymously to *nornir*. There is no doubt about how Brynhildr sees them here, calling them *grímmar urðir*, much as she refers to *liótar nornir* a little later.

This interestingly recalls Gullrönd’s choice of words in *Guðrúnarkviða I* 24, where she has helped her sister, Guðrún, to grieve for Sigurðr, Guðrún’s dead husband. When Brynhildr joins in their conversation, Gullrönd reacts thus:

Þá qvað þat Gullrönd,  
Gjúka dóttir:  
‘Þegi þú, þjóðleið,  
þeira orða!  
urðr qðlinga  
hefir þú æ verið;

rekr þik alda hverr  
illrar scepno,  
sorg sára  
siau konunga,  
oc vinspell  
vífa mest.’

‡

Then said Gullrǫnd,  
Gjúki’s daughter:  
‘Be silent, you hated woman,  
stop these words!  
The nemesis of princes  
you have always been;  
every wave of ill fate  
drives you along,  
you wounding sorrow  
of seven kings,  
you have done the greatest damage  
to friendship between women.’

Gullrǫnd uses the term *urðr* to describe Brynhildr and the intention is clearly to emphasise what evil Brynhildr has caused, much as Brynhildr herself employs the term in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 5. Larrington’s translation of this particular phrase (1996, p. 180), which I follow here, sums up the intended meaning very well; the statement is supposed to sound like an accusation and it does. Using the term *urðr* about a woman in this way indicates that she is disruptive — if not outright evil. Significantly, Gullrǫnd holds Brynhildr entirely responsible for her actions; to her, fate is no excuse for bad behaviour, which suggests a different underlying idea, perhaps Christian, of the extent of human free will.

Whereas the *nornir* are normally defined by their actions — by verbs describing what they do — some texts use adjectives to describe what they are like. *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* is an example, employing the phrases *liótar nornir* and *grimmar urðir*. *Reginsmál* 2 has a similar usage:

Andvari ec heiti,  
Óinn hét minn faðir,  
margan hefi ec fors um farið;



aumlig norn  
scóp oss í árdaga,  
at ec scylda í vatni vaða.  
✚  
Andvari I am called,  
Óinn my father was called,  
I have passed over many a waterfall;  
A miserable norn  
decided for me long ago  
that I should wade the water.

Here, a singular *norn* is described as *aumlig*, which translates as ‘pitiable’ (Frtz, s.v.), ‘miserable’ (AeW, s.v.), ‘poor, wretched’ (C/V, s.v.). According to the dictionaries, *aumlig* encompasses both meanings of ‘miserable’: it can mean that you feel pity for the person who is miserable, but it can also mean that the person is evil, thus causing wretchedness for someone else. Here, it seems to be the latter sense because Andvari evidently feels sorry for himself rather than for the *norn*. He seems to make a moral judgement on the *norn*, finding her decisions contemptible, and therefore he considers her despicable.

Another situation of emotions running high draws on an image very like the one from *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, namely in *Guðrúnarhvöt* 13:

Gecc ec til strandar,  
grōm varc nornom,  
vilda ec hrinda  
stríð grið þeira;  
hófo mic, né drecþo,  
hávar báror,  
því ec land um stéc,  
at lifa scyldac.  
✚  
I went to the shore,  
I was furious at the nornir,  
I would not accept  
their harsh truce offering —  
great waves lifted me,  
did not drown me:

so that I came to land,  
I was compelled to live.

This poem opens with Guðrún urging her sons to avenge the death of their half-sister but, after she has successfully seen them off, she breaks into a long list of woes, recounting all her past sorrows. The situation recalls that of Brynhildr in that Guðrún feels both forced into committing horrible acts of revenge and tremendous grief even as she does so, caught in a tragic combination of necessity and inhumanity. What is different is that Guðrún expresses her own active attitude towards the *nornir*, stating that she is furious with them, whereas Brynhildr expresses a more passive view, stating that they have acted hatefully towards her.

The above stanza tells of Guðrún's attempt, unsuccessful, to take her own life by drowning herself. At this point in Guðrún's life story she has lost two husbands, two sons and two brothers, all because of the imperative to avenge slighted honour. Her brothers kill her first husband, Sigurðr, for gold and because Brynhildr urges them to do it; she is then married to Atli, who treacherously murders her brothers for the gold; Guðrún herself then kills her sons by Atli and burns her husband in his hall. It can come as no surprise that she feels life has become unbearable. It is interesting that she refers to this situation as the 'harsh truce offering of the *nornir*', thereby portraying the *nornir* as being engaged in the system of honour and revenge. This is what she has to go through in order to obtain revenge and re-establish a balance. The terms they are offering her are harsh and she does not like the situation she is put in; even so, backing out is not an option for her and she proceeds to send off her remaining two sons on yet another revenge expedition.

Warfare is the issue in *Atlakviða* 16, where Guðrún addresses her brother Gunnarr as he arrives at Atli's:

Betr hefðir þú, bróðir,  
at þú í brynio færir,  
sem hiálmom aringreypom,<sup>30</sup>  
at síá heim Atla;  
sætir þú í sǫðlom  
sólheiða daga,  
nái nauðfǫlva  
létir nornir gráta,

Húna scialdmeyiar  
hervi kanna,<sup>31</sup>  
enn Atla síalfan  
létir þú í ormgarð koma;  
nú er sá ormgarðr  
ycr um fólgin.

‡

It were better, brother,  
if you had come in armour,  
like hearth-encircling helmets,  
to see Atli's home,  
had you sat in the saddle  
through sun-heated days,  
made the *nornir* weep  
at corpses deathly pale,  
taught Hunnish shield-maidens  
how to work the fields,<sup>32</sup>  
and Atli himself  
you could have put in a snake pit —  
now that snake pit  
is reserved for you!

The image here seems to be that the *nornir* would have wept over the tremendous number of men that Gunnarr would have slain had he come to Atli's place prepared for war. While this reveals that the *nornir* are capable of feeling pity for human beings, the enormous scale of what it takes to make them show their pity does little to make them seem approachable in any way — making the *nornir* weep would appear to cost some indescribable number of human lives; indeed, Jón Helgason (1962, p. 154) interprets the phrase as meaning 'no tears at all'. The stanza describes a hypothetical Burgundian victory for Gunnarr — had he brought an army then he would also have won — and the hypothetical mode is followed up by descriptions of such unlikely events as weeping *nornir* and Hunnish shield-maidens dragging the harrows like farm animals — as they might have been forced to do had the Burgundians overcome them. The imaginary carnage, however, may simply be intended to emphasise Gunnarr's skills as a warrior, indicating that he would have been capable of bringing about that situation.

Of interest is the alliterating combination of *nornir* with *naud̥*, ‘need, necessity, distress’, found also in *pulur* and *Fáfnismál* 12. *Naud̥* is, moreover, used as the name for the N-rune (Frtz, s.v; LP, s.v), a connection evidently made in the list of various uses of runes in *Sigrdrífumál* where stanza 7 instructs thus: *ok merkia á nagli Nauð* (and mark your nail with *Nauð* [presumably the N-rune]),<sup>33</sup> while stanza 17 mentions runes carved *á nornar nagli* (on the nail of the *norn*; see McKinnell *et al.* 2004, pp. 31–9). This apparently close connection between *nornir* and *naud̥* seems to emphasise that these supernatural females were thought of primarily in relation to issues of distress, although this may have found positive as well as negative expression. If anything, *Atlakviða* 16, despite its reference to emotional sympathy on their part, reinforces the stern aspect of the *nornir*.

This portrait is reiterated in one of the runic inscriptions, c.1180 (Olsen, 1957, p. 150), from Borgund stave church in Sogn, Norway. This is number IV of the Borgund runic inscriptions:

Þorir ræist runar þissar þan olaus messo æþþan [e]rhan for herum  
bæþegerþono(r)ner uæl ok illa mikla mǫþe g skapaþu þærmer  
(Normalised: Þórir reist rúnar þessar þann Ólausmessuaptan,  
er hann fór hér um. Bæði gerðu *nornir* vel ok illa; mikla mæði  
[g]<sup>34</sup> sköpuðu þær mér)

✚

Þórir carved these runes on the eve of Olav’s mass<sup>35</sup> when he came by here. The *nornir* did both good and evil; for me they have created much suffering.

Þórir, who carved the inscription, has the *nornir* in charge of both good and bad, after which he goes on to lament that they have put much evil in his path. The inscription, however, attaches both good and evil aspects to the same one group of *nornir*; it does not refer to two separate types of *nornir* the way Snorri does (see 3.1.1).

That the *nornir* make decisions can also be conveyed via the noun *sköþ*, cognate with English ‘shape’ but meaning ‘fate’, and the corresponding verb *skapa*, ‘to create, to give shape to’. Both these Old Norse words can carry a sense of fate as shown in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 28, the latter half of which reads:

Vantattu vígi,  
var þér þat skapað,

at þú at rógi  
rícmenni vart.

✚

You could not stop the fighting,  
that was shaped for you  
so that you were the cause of strife  
among powerful men.

Likewise, the latter part of *Fáfnismál* 44 reads:

máat Sigrdrífar  
svefni bregða,  
sciöldunga niðr,  
fyr scöpom norna.

✚

a descendant of heroes  
may not break  
Sigrdrífa's sleep,  
because of the decision of the nornir.

*Skapa* and *skop* in these two passages refer to that which the *nornir* have shaped, created, allotted to or decided for a person — their fate.

The same phrase is employed in the supposedly twelfth-century *Krákumál* 24:<sup>36</sup>

Hjoggum vér með hjörvi.  
Hitt sýnisk mér raunar,  
at forlögum fylgjum,  
fár gengr of skop norna  
(Finnur Jónsson, 1905, p. 156/6)

✚

We cut with swords.  
It really seems to me  
that we must follow fate,  
few escape what the nornir decide

The phrase *skop norna* in *Krákumál* 24 corresponds to *kviðr norna* in *Hamðismál*; both refer to death in battle. The image of a shaping power conveys the idea that fate works with a purpose; it is organising, shaping and arranging events in some coherent order or following some sort of pattern, even if the pattern is not discernible to human eyes.

A somewhat enigmatic reference to the *nornir* occurs in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 38:

Svá mic nýliga  
nornir vekia,  
vílsinnis spá  
vildi at ec réða:  
hugða ec þic, Guðrún,  
Giúca dóttir,  
læblöndom hiqr  
leggia mic í gognom.  
‡  
So recently  
the nornir have awakened me,  
he wanted me to interpret  
harmful prophecies:  
‘I thought that you, Guðrún,  
daughter of Giúki,  
ran me through  
with a treacherous sword.’

The context is that of Atli’s impending death. He asks Guðrún, his wife, to interpret his dreams and she deliberately misinterprets them so that he feels reassured, although she is, in fact, plotting to kill him. To find the *nornir* involved in the scene is not in itself surprising, but the meaning of the phrase that they ‘have awakened’ Guðrún is not immediately clear. Perhaps it is a way of describing her extreme state of mind, thinking of nothing other than how she can avenge Sigurðr and how little she cares for Atli; perhaps it is a description of how she becomes aware of the imperative to take revenge and that it is this awareness which the *nornir* awaken in her. This would then, again, link the *nornir* to issues pertaining to honour and revenge. At any rate, to be awakened by the *nornir* is not something that produces gentle thoughts, quite the contrary if we are to judge by Guðrún’s reactions to Atli’s dreams.

Until now, the *nornir* have shown themselves to be strongly linked to transitions involving death but, although it may be weighted heavily in this direction, the image of the *nornir* is not one-dimensional. They are also linked to other kinds of transitions.

*Fáfnismál* 12 mentions the *nornir*, possibly in connection with birth:

Segðu mér, Fáfnir,  
allz þic fróðan qveða  
oc vel mart vita:  
hveriar ro þær nornir,<sup>37</sup>  
er nauðgonglar ro  
oc kiósa mæðr frá mōgom?<sup>38</sup>

†

Tell me, Fáfnir,  
as men say that you are wise  
and know a great deal:  
who are those nornir  
who go to those in need  
and separate mothers from sons?

On the one hand, the phrase in line 4, ‘who are those *nornir*’, combined with the fact that very similar lines occur elsewhere (see note 37), referring to *meyiar* (maidens), makes it possible that the word *nornir* is employed here as a *heiti*. It is quite possible to read the line more generally as ‘who are those supernatural women’. The reply in stanza 13 emphasises that there are different kinds of *nornir*, which may then be taken simply to mean that there are differences between separate categories of supernatural women, though the information supplied in *Fáfnismál* 13 is not easily aligned with information given in other sources. On the other hand, the consistent use of the term *norn* in stanzas 11, 12 and 13 of *Fáfnismál* makes it plausible that it does refer to *nornir* and is not used as a *heiti*.

The role attributed to the *nornir* in *Fáfnismál* 12 is somewhat ambiguous and hints at their double-sided nature: they bring life but they also take it away. The phrase *kiósa frá* is unusual and it is not entirely clear what the *nornir* really do here, making translation difficult, but two options are possible: either it simply means that, at birth, the *nornir* separate the child from its mother, making them two individual beings (KLE, Vol. 5, pp. 431–2), or it means that the *nornir* determine whether the mother or the child will live (Gísli Sigurðsson, 1998, p. 253), although the latter implies that either mother or child *will* die and does not really allow for the cases in which both of them live. The phrase *kiósa frá*, then, may translate either as ‘choose between’ or, more likely, as ‘separate from’.<sup>39</sup> Whichever way *kiósa frá* is

translated, the *nornir*, with their powers to determine matters concerning life and death, are involved here in the crucial moments of transition from one state to another.<sup>40</sup>

That *Fáfnismál* 12 does actually refer to birth is, however, not incontestable but hinges on our understanding of the term *nauðgönglar*, ‘those who go to those in need’. This is a *hapax legomenon* and as such occurs nowhere else, so it is difficult to ascertain its exact meaning; the meaning of ‘those in need’ and the separation of mothers from sons (or sons from mothers in *Völsungasaga*, see note 38) could just as well refer to mothers losing their sons because they die, describing the transition out of life into death, rather than the transition into life at birth.<sup>41</sup> To read the stanza as a reference to childbirth is at best conjectural, though it is natural to assume that the *nornir* would be linked to the beginning of life and not just to its end. If it does describe birth, then this stanza is the only early evidence for the *nornir* as potential helpers at birth.<sup>42</sup>

As mentioned, the literature shows little evidence of worship or of any sort of cult attached to the *nornir*, but a few references from late traditions speak of a special food, *nornagraut*, ‘norn-porridge’, which had its place in relation to childbirth. Apparently, a custom involving this food existed in folk tradition until fairly recent times in certain areas of Scandinavia: Setesdal in Norway (Skar, 1909, p. 120; Reichborn-Kjennerud, 1933, pp. 63, 76) and the Faroe Islands (Lid, 1946, p. 18; de Vries, 1956, p. 272; Olsen, 1957, p. 156). Ström says about *nornagraut*: *Den tilreddes vid ett barns födelse och har ansetts vara ett ursprungligt offer till nornorna* (It was prepared when a child was born and has been considered to have originally been a sacrifice to the *nornir*; Ström, 1985 [1961], p. 202). Noteworthy here is that Bäckman (1984, pp. 31–2) mentions a similar tradition among the Saami, involving a group of female supernatural beings known as the *akkas*.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore it is said that when the woman’s time has come *Madder-Akka* and her daughter *Sarakka* will stay at the woman’s side and aid her. For this assistance they get offerings from the mother in the form of animal sacrifices. Immediately after the birth a meal will be prepared, called *Sarakka-porridge* which the mother will eat together with her married female friends. Three pegs are put into the porridge, one white, the



other black, and the third with three rings carved on it. After the porridge is eaten the pegs are placed under the threshold for three nights and if the black one disappears the mother or her child will die soon, but if the white one is gone the mother knows that both of them will stay alive.<sup>44</sup>

Ränk (1955, p. 24) adds the following:

In this porridge three wooden matches were stuck, one of them with a cloven end, which evidently had some meaning connected with the health of the mother and the child.

Troels Lund (1908, p. 53), speaking of sixteenth-century Denmark, also knows such a custom:

Hos mange gammeldags var der anbragt tre Pinde i den [Barsel-Grøden], der maaske oprindeligt havde haft Hentydning til de tre Norner, Skæbnens Gudinder; Barnets Lykke antoges i hvert fald at staa i et vist Forhold til disse Pinde.

‡

In many old-fashioned homes, there were three sticks placed in it [the childbirth-porridge], which may originally have alluded to the three nornir, the goddesses of fate; at any rate, the child's fortune was seen in a certain relationship to these sticks.

The descriptions given by Bäckman and Lund may throw some light on *Fáfnismál* 12.

Jacobsen and Matras' Faroese–Danish dictionary (1961 [1928–9], p. 299) lists these two words: *nornagreytur*, 'norn-porridge'; *det første Maaltid, som en Kvinde nyder efter en Barnefødsel* (the first meal taken by a woman after giving birth); and *nornaspor*, 'norn-print'; *hvid Plet paa Negl (siges at forkynde et Menneskes Skæbne)* (white spot on a nail [is said to prophesy the fate of a person]). Olsen comments on these words: *Disse ord synes henholdsvis å sikte til offer som tilkom nornene, og til den hjælpende nornehånd ved forløsning* (These words appear to indicate, respectively, a sacrifice to the *nornir* and the helping *norn's* hand at birth; Olsen, 1957, p. 156). The term *nornaspor* seems oddly parallel to the cutting of runes on the *norn's* nail in *Sigrdrífumál* 17: *á norna nagli*.<sup>45</sup> In the light of how *nornir* are described in the poetry, one might wonder whether their hand is indeed a helping one. However, the discrepancies could also indicate that Norwegian

and Faroese conceptions of the *nornir* were different from Icelandic ones, that traditions in these areas developed differently from Iceland, or that later folk traditions saw the *nornir* as more benign. At the same time it must be kept in mind that birth merits much less attention in the sources than death does. Birth seems to fall into the category of normal activities, whereas death is something to talk about, especially heroic or violent death. This may partly explain why the *nornir* are mentioned so much more frequently in the context of death: only few births are described.

The one image that keeps occurring with the *nornir* is that of making choices, making decisions or passing judgement, always in transitional situations: birth, death, battle — typically situations where people feel that matters are not (or at least not only) in their own hands. The transitional element is inherent to choice. The nature of a choice is that it represents some sort of threshold or a crossroads; if it does not bring about any change or transition, it is not really a choice. It is at such crucial times that people appear particularly prone to feeling the influence of the *nornir* on their lives.

The picture so far seems somewhat lopsided: the *nornir* are in charge of both birth and death but the tendency is to remember them primarily when lives are ending rather than when they are beginning. It further seems that they are there to be blamed for it when events take a rough turn (*Guðrúnarhytti* 13, *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 5–7, *Kveldúlfur*).<sup>46</sup> In terms of human emotion, this is not an uncommon type of reaction, for example many people will admit that they pray only when they are in trouble and that as long as things are going well they do not think much about praying. Given the quasi-legal aspect of the *nornir*, a parallel to how law operates is appropriate, because the law is only brought into action when a problem needs to be solved, yet this does not make the law a negatively loaded concept (see 5.2). As long as there are no problems, there is no need to involve the law, yet the law is there all the time. What this means in Old Norse literature is that the *nornir* have a tendency to appear almost as a metaphor for emotionally taxing events and circumstances that are tragic from the point of view of those involved: ‘The natural inclination to look for reasons when things go wrong burdened the norns especially with the responsibility for cruel fate’ (Mundal, 1993, p. 626). This is true; it is rare to find someone saying that the *nornir* were good to him or her, because the portrayal of them is often sinister. Still, we should be careful about jumping

to conclusions; the *nornir* are not synonymous with evil fate — there is much more to say about them.

It is interesting to note that, like *dísir* and *valkyrjur*, the *nornir* hardly ever turn up in mythological poems. Apart from *Völuspá* (which probably describes them, but does not use the term *nornir*), they are mentioned almost exclusively in heroic and skaldic poetry. Importantly, enough of the heroic and skaldic references are in all likelihood very early and therefore suggest that the *nornir* are a genuine part of pre-Christian traditions, not an antiquarian invention.

### 2.1.2 *Dísir*

In order to appreciate the relationship between *nornir*, *dísir* and *valkyrjur*, it is necessary to consider the latter two categories more closely. The *dísir*, like the *nornir*, are a collective group of female beings connected to issues of birth and death, but also to fecundity. The situation surrounding them is somewhat different because there are many more references to them than to the *nornir*; the term *dísir* turns up in the literature, both prose and poetry, far more frequently than does the term *nornir*. This means that it is neither possible nor appropriate here to give a complete overview of the *dísir*; the scope, instead, is limited to pointing out differences and similarities between the *nornir* and the *dísir* as well as attempting to give a general description of the nature of the *dísir*.<sup>47</sup> The texts quoted in this chapter have been selected with the aim of achieving such a general understanding of what the *dísir* represent.

Kennings based on the word *dís* (sg.) are much more frequent than ones based on the word *norn*, and it can be difficult to gauge which text passages concern actual *dísir* and which employ the term as a *heiti*.<sup>48</sup> Thus, *dís* may refer simply to a woman or a female character of some kind but it may also refer to a figure belonging to this special group of supernatural women. At present, the supernatural figures are regarded as the ‘proper’ *dísir*, the ones to whom the meaning of the term originally refers. The attempt made here to avoid quoting texts which use the word as a *heiti* is deliberate.

The etymology offered by de Vries (AeW, s.v. *dís*) suggests that the term refers very generally to a *weibliche götterwesen* (goddess, feminine divine being), but mentions that it may be related to Old Indic *dhiṣanyant-*, ‘attentive, devout’. Pokorny does not mention Old Norse *dís* but derives *dhiṣanyant-* (1959–69, s.v.) from an s-form of *dhī-*, ‘to see’, from which

also derive words for wisdom, thought and insight, and this could be relevant to an understanding of the *dísir*. Gunnell (2004a [2000], p. 130), on mentioning *fylgjur*, says:

*Dísir*, on the other hand, seem to have been more powerful. Like the *valkyrjur*, these were female spirits with male characteristics (they ride horses, and ... ‘hunt’ down victims). ... Unlike the other two types of beings [*fylgjur* and *valkyrjur*], however, the *dísir* sometimes receive sacrifices, have place names dedicated to them, and appear to protect not only individuals but also families and even nations.

Raudvere (2003, p. 68) holds a similar position:

Disernas funktion verkar närmast ha varit att värna äring och produktion på en viss plats. De är mer förbundna till landskapet och har mer utpräglat beskyddande roll än de mer abstrakta fylgjorna. De senare är relaterade till en individ eller familj, medan diserna verkar vara primärt kopplade till en bestämd plats.



The function of the *dísir* seems to have been the protection of crops and production in a certain place. They are more closely related to the landscape and have a more markedly protective role than the more abstract *fylgjur*. The latter are connected to an individual or family, while the *dísir* seem primarily connected to a certain place.

*Dísir* appear to have been protective spirits, possibly female ancestor spirits, and in Old Norse beliefs there was a cult of them. People would sacrifice to them at the *dísablót* (it may be telling that such a thing as *nornablót* is never mentioned), which were festivals held at certain seasons, namely at the beginning of winter (Winter Nights) and seemingly also in spring (Gunnell, 2004a [2000], pp. 131–4). Such festivals are mentioned in several sources,<sup>49</sup> and people would apparently also call on the *dísir* for help in other less predictable situations, including childbirth, as in *Sigrdrífumál* 9:

Biargrúnar scaltu kunna  
ef þú biarga vilt  
oc leysa kind frá konom;<sup>50</sup>  
á lófa þær scal rísta<sup>51</sup>

oc of liðo spennu  
oc biðia þá dísir duga.



Helping-runes you must know  
if you want to help  
and release children from women;  
they should be cut on the palm  
and put around the joints  
and then you ask the dísir to help.

In this stanza the *dísir*, like the *nornir*, act as givers and takers of life and appear in particular to provide protection at the beginning of a new life. They also seem quite practically minded, able to step into the situation in order to lend their assistance. That one should ask for the help of the *dísir* reveals that they were considered willing to help, lending them a more balanced image than that of the *nornir*, whose involvement people generally prefer to avoid and never seem to ask for. But the *dísir* are not wholly life-affirming, as the ‘association with impending death seems to be common place of the usage of the term “*dísir*” in eddic poetry’ (Lindow, 2001, p. 95). Like the *nornir*, the *dísir* are rarely mentioned in the mythological poems.

*Atlamál* 28 links the *dísir* to ‘dead women’ who come in the night, intending to ‘choose’ Gunnarr:

Konor hugðac dauðar  
koma í nótt hingat,  
værit vart búnar,  
vildi þic kíosa,  
byði þér brállega  
til beccia sinna:  
ec qveð aflima  
orðnar þér dísir!



I thought that dead women  
came here in the night,  
they were scantily clad,  
wanting to choose you,  
invite you very soon  
to their benches:

I say that useless  
the *dísir* have become for you!

Who these ‘dead women’ are is unclear — perhaps supernatural women who select the time of death for people, or perhaps certain aspects common to *dísir*, *nornir* and *valkyrjur* have merged. Certainly, the mood in the stanza is ominous; yet a dichotomy can also be detected, because the *dísir* are unable to help Gunnarr against the ‘dead women’ — whoever may hide behind that label. The impression is that the *dísir* are protective spirits, perhaps guardians of life in opposition to figures that here represent death. However, it is also possible that the ‘dead women’ are themselves *dísir* so that the stanza hints at some opposition between separate subgroups of *dísir* or between conflicting aspects of what the *dísir* stand for (compare *Þiðrandi þáttir ok Þórhalls*). *Konor dauðar* is not a common phrase. Taken literally, it may refer to ancestress figures, but it also recalls the *draumkonur* (dream-women) of *Gísli saga Súrssonar*.<sup>52</sup> Clearly, their purpose here is to signal Gunnarr’s impending death and bring him to the realm of the dead, and the idea of selection is again emphasised as is otherworldly power in female form.

A somewhat similar reference to *dísir* crops up in *Hamðismál* 28, when Hamðir and Sqrli find that cutting off Iqrmunrekkr’s arms and legs does not prevent him from shouting to his men to kill them:

Af væri nú haufuð,  
ef Erpr lifði,  
bróðir occarr inn þøðfrækni,  
er við á braut vágom  
verr inn vígfræcni  
— hvøttomc at *dísir* —,  
gumi inn gunnhelgi  
— gorðomz at vígi —.

†

Off the head would now be  
if Erpr were alive,  
our brother, the battle-bold one,  
whom we killed on the way  
the man courageous in battle  
— I was encouraged by the *dísir* —

the man untouchable in battle  
— we prepared to kill him.

Revealed here is that sinister aspect of the *dísir* wherein they seem to overlap significantly with the dark facets of the *nornir*. Hamðir says that the *dísir* urged him to kill his brother Erpr and now he regrets it because it means that Erpr cannot help him and Sqrli in their fight against Iormunrekkr. This would seem an entirely appropriate context for the *nornir* to appear in but for the fact that, ordinarily, the *nornir* simply decide, they do not urge people to carry out certain actions. Such direct interaction with human actions rarely occurs on the part of the *nornir*.<sup>53</sup> Still, the *dísir* embody the duality more clearly than the *nornir* do because the *dísir* often appear in benign roles as well as in sinister ones; the portrayal of the *nornir* is less balanced, weighted more towards the negative end.

A couple of terms compound the word *dís* with other elements, for example *spádís*, which is at times used in *fornaldarsögur*, such as in *Völsungasaga* 11 where it is said of Sigmundur that *sva hlifðv honum hans spádísir at hann varð ecki sár. ok engi kuni taul hversv margr maðr fell fyrir honum* (his *spádísir* protected him so that he was not wounded, and no one could count how many men fell at his hand; Grimstad, 2000, p. 116). Raudvere (2003, p. 68) suggests that this term refers to *völur*, but that seems unlikely in this case where *spádísir* act as protectresses, not as seeresses. Byock (1990, p. 53) translates the word appropriately as ‘spawomen’ but then notes that ‘*Spádísir* is often used in a generalised or metaphorical sense to refer to valkyries, Norns, or goddesses. Here it would seem to be Norns, deciding men’s fate’ (Byock, 1990, p. 116). Grimstad also translates the term as ‘norns’ (2000, p. 117). I agree that the term is vague, but I disagree on translating it as ‘norns’. These *spádísir*, protecting their chosen hero, act like *fylgjur*, *valkyrjur* or *galdranornir* but not like *örlaganornir*.<sup>54</sup>

Another couple of compounds are found in the epithets Vanadís for Freyia (*Gylfaginning* 34) and Qndurdís for Skaði (*Háleygjatal* 4, allegedly c.985; *Gylfaginning* 23). These are interesting because both figures concerned are highly independent and highly honoured goddesses. Freyia ‘chooses half the slain’ (*Grímnismál* 14), which lends her an identity as a female counterpart of Óðinn (perhaps recalling the *norn* in *Kveldúlfr*’s verse; see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2006), and Vanadís could be a name drawing on the link between fecundity and death twice over — through the *vanir* and through the

*dísir*. Similarly, Öndurdís, ‘Skiing-*dís*’, may show Skaði as a female counterpart of Ullr (Simek, 1993, pp. 286–7), god of archery and skiing (*Gylfaginning* 31), with her connection to the *dísir* provided by her fiercely independent and masculine behaviour when she turns up among the gods, weapons and all, seeking revenge for her dead father (*Skáldskaparmál* G56). This blend of independent femininity and clearly masculine elements is mirrored in the female *dísir* who ride horses and carry weapons.

The cult of the *dísir*, mentioned above, appears to have been a fertility cult, portraying two sides of these supernatural women, one of which is life-enhancing and life-giving while the complementary other side relates to death and the taking of life. This double nature is clearly pictured in the story of *Þiðrandi þáttur ok Þórhallis*.<sup>55</sup> In this tale, Þiðrandi, against the advice of his father, answers a knock on the door during the Winter Nights (see note 49). The text continues:

Hann tók sverð í hönd sér ok gekk út. Hann sá engan mann. Kom honum þá þat í hug, at nökkir boðsmenn mundu hafa riðit fyrir heim til bæjarins ok riðit síðan aftr í móti þeim, er seinna riðu. Hann gekk þá undir viðarköstinn ok heyrði at riðit var norðan á völlinn. Hann sá, at þat váru konur níu ok váru allar í svörtum klæðum ok höfðu brugðin sverð í höndum. Hann heyrði ok at riðit var sunnan á völlinn. Þar váru ok níu konur, allar í ljósum klæðum ok á hvítum hestum. Þá vildi Þiðrandi snúa inn aftr ok segja mönnum sýnina. Þá bar þar at fyrr konurnar, þær inar svartklæddu, ok sóttu at honum, en hann varðist vel ok drengilega. (ÍS, Vol. 10, p. 376)

†

He took a sword in his hand, and went out. He could see no one. It struck him that some guests might have ridden ahead to the farm, and then ridden back to those who were riding more slowly. He then went under the wood pile, and heard the sound of riding coming into the field from the north. He saw that there were nine women, all of them in black clothes and with drawn swords in their hands. He also heard the sound of riding into the field from the south. There were another nine women, all of them in light clothes, and on white horses. Thidrandi wanted to go back in and tell people about the sight,



but the women, those dressed in black, got to him first and they attacked him. He defended himself bravely. (CSI, Vol. 2, pp. 460–1)

In spite of his defence, Þiðrandi is killed by the mysterious black women.

The incident is interpreted in the text itself as an approaching change of religion where the black riders symbolise the old faith and the white ones represent the new faith, Christianity, which is a ‘better’ faith but is not yet strong enough to save Þiðrandi’s life, lending the story a strongly Christian flavour.<sup>56</sup> While this could well be a later, rationalising interpretation of the *dísir*, who are also referred to as *fylgjur* in the text (ÍS, Vol. 10, p. 377), dividing them into two groups of which one is dark and evil while the other is bright and benign, it still conveys their double-sided nature: *dísir* have the potential for being both evil and benign, just as the *nornir* have.

In *Þiðrandi þáttur ok Þorhalls* the *dísir* come riding, indicating their connection to horses and possibly portraying the horse in the role of mediator between the living and the dead.<sup>57</sup> In *Gísli saga* 30, where Gísli has nightly visitations from a good and an evil dream-woman, the good dream-woman appears to him one night, riding a grey horse and showing him the otherworld:

Einhverja nótt er þat enn, at Gísli dreymir, at konan sú in betri kom at honum. Hon sýndisk honum ríða grám hesti ok býðr honum með sér at fara til síns innis, ok þat þekkisk hann. Þau koma nú at húsi einu, því er nær var sem holl væri, ok leiðir hon hann inn í húsit ok þóttu honum þar vera hægendi í þöllum ok vel um búit. Hon bað þau þar vera ok una sér vel, — ‘ok skaltu hingat fara, þá er þú andask,’ sagði hon, ‘ok njóta hér fjár ok farsælu.’ (ÍF, Vol. 6, p. 94)

†

One night, Gísli dreamed again that the good dream-woman came to him. She was riding a grey horse, and she invited him to come home with her, to which he agreed. They arrived at a house, which was more like a great hall, and she led him inside. He saw cushions on the raised benches and the whole place was beautifully decorated. She told him they would stay here and take their pleasure — ‘and this is where you will come when you die,’ she said, ‘and enjoy wealth and great happiness here.’ (CSI, Vol. 2, p. 38)

The evil dream-woman, however, has quite different ideas in mind in Chapter 33:

‘Þat dreymdi mik enn,’ sagði Gísli, ‘at sjá kona kom til mín ok batt á hofuð mér dreyrga húfu ok þó áðr hofuð mitt í blóði ok jós á mik allan, svá at ek varð alblóðugr.’ (ÍF, Vol. 6, p. 103)

‡

‘Then in a second dream,’ he said, ‘this woman came to me and tied a blood-stained cap on my head, and before that she bathed my head in blood and poured it all over me, covering me in gore.’ (CSI, Vol. 2, p. 42)

These *draumkonur* are clearly otherworldly messengers and the appearances of a good and an evil dream-woman resembles the black and white *dísir* in *Þiðrandi þátrr ok Þórhalls* as well as the double-sided nature of many kinds of supernatural women. The grey colour of the horse recalls Sleipnir, the eight-legged horse that can cross the borders to the otherworld, and the *dísir* on their horses seem to belong to this in-between area, the borders between this world and the next, supernatural women in control of human life and death who mediate between the known and the unknown realms.

The *dísir* appear to have been protective spirits of a kind and, like the *nornir*, the tendency is for them to appear and to act as a collective whole rather than as individually named beings and, like the *valkyrjur*, they seem at times attached particularly to one specific person. The fact that there was a cult of them gives the *dísir* at least a sheen of being approachable — if people sacrifice to them then this must be because they hope to influence them, though not necessarily always in a good way. The *dísir* are seemingly relatively easier to enter into some sort of dialogue with than are the *nornir*, and it is possible that the extensive use of the term *dís* is indicative of a type of being with whom people felt comfortable, who were somehow present in everyday life and who therefore seemed more familiar than the unapproachable *nornir* whom, as has been indicated, one could hardly hope to influence anyway.

### 2.1.3 *Valkyrjur*

The *valkyrjur* are a third group of related but nevertheless separate beings. The word *valkyrja* has quite a specific etymological meaning, namely: ‘chooser or selector of the slain’ (from *valr* [m.], ‘men slain in battle’, and *kiósa*, ‘to choose’ or ‘to select’). This interpretation goes a long way in

explaining how they are most commonly understood: as female supernatural battle spirits deciding who will be slain in battle (Damico, 1984, p. 44; Simek, 1993, p. 349; Lindow, 2001, p. 95; Price, 2002, p. 331; Stefánsson, 2005, p. 252). They are mentioned in heroic and skaldic poetry and also in *fornaldarsögur*, but not in *Íslendingasögur*. Like the *nornir*, they apparently belong to the mythical realm, not historical reality. As will be seen, however, it is a curious aspect of this etymological explanation that choosing the slain is rarely what the *valkyrjur* actually do.<sup>58</sup>

Like *dísir*, *valkyrjur* are mentioned more frequently in the sources than are *nornir*, which means that a small selection of references to them will have to suffice here. Three skaldic poems make extensive references to *valkyrjur* and, as these three are probably the earliest surviving mentions of these beings, they are particularly relevant to a discussion of what *valkyrjur* really are. Þorbjörn hornklofi's *Haraldskvæði* (also known as *Hrafnsmál*) 1–3, supposedly c.900, in *Noregs konungatal* 2, is likely the oldest:

Hlýði hringberendr,  
meðan ek frá Haraldi segi  
odda íþróttir  
enum afar-auðga;  
frá málum munk segja,  
þeim es ek mey heyrða,  
hvíta haddbjarta  
es við hrafn dæmði.

Vitr þottisk valkyrja,  
verar né óru þekkir  
feimu enni framsóttu,  
es fuglsrødd kunni;  
kvaddi en kverkhvíta  
ok en gløggarma  
Hymis hausreyti,<sup>59</sup>  
es sat á horni vinbjarga.

Hvat es yðr hrafnar?  
hvaðan eruð ér komnir  
með dreygu nefi

at degi ǫndverðum?  
Hold loðir yðr í klóum,  
hræs þefr gengr ór munni,  
nær hygg ek yðr í nótt bjoggu  
því es vissuð nái liggja.  
(ÍF, Vol. 29, pp. 59–60)

✚

Listen, ring-carriers,  
while of Haraldr  
I will tell his many deeds,  
the very wealthy one;  
I will tell of the words  
which I heard from a fair maiden,  
white, with very fair hair,  
who was talking to a raven.

The valkyrja seemed wise,  
men were not dear to  
the keen-eyed one  
who understood bird speech;  
she of the white neck  
and the fair arms  
greeted the raven  
that sat on the back of the grassy hill.

What is with you ravens?  
whence have you come  
with bloody beak  
so early in the day?  
Flesh hangs from your claws,  
corpse smell from your mouth,  
you seem this night to have been  
where you knew corpses lay.

The poem gives this portrait of a *valkyrja*: she is a fair maiden who talks to a raven about a recent battle.<sup>60</sup> She asks the raven why it has blood on its beak, flesh in its claws and a stench of death about it; the bird then begins to

describe the events leading up to a battle. She herself is not involved in the fighting at all, nor is she present on the battlefield, and she only speaks to the raven afterwards. In fact, she appears to be an otherworldly mediator (or perhaps a literary construct): Þorbjörn displaces the perspective to her, who understands the language of birds, and she in turn displaces it to the raven. It is an elaborate introduction, taking up three stanzas before the action begins, and this strange woman figures only as an interpreter between Þorbjörn and a talking raven; she apparently has no direct connection to the fighting.<sup>61</sup>

The second skaldic reference is in *Eiríksmál* 1, supposedly c.954 (Skj BI, p. 164), in *Noregs konungatal* 8 and *Skáldskaparmál* 2, where *valkyrjur* appear as barmaids in Valhøll, bringing wine to the warriors there:

Hvat er þat drauma, kvað Óðinn,  
Ek hugðumk fyr dag rísa  
Valhøll ryðja  
fyrir vegnu fólki,  
vekða ek einherja,  
bæða ek upp rísa  
bekki at strá,  
bjórker leyðra,  
valkyrjur vín bera  
sem vísi komi.

(ÍF, Vol. 29, pp. 77–8; Snorri Sturluson, 1998, p. 10)

‡

What dreams are these,  
I thought I got up before day  
to clear up Valhøll  
for slain warriors;  
I woke the einherjar,  
asked them to get up  
to strew the benches  
and fill beer casks,  
asked the valkyrjur to carry wine  
as if a prince were coming.

Here, the *valkyrjur* are clearly placed in the otherworld, in Valhøll where they serve drink for the *einherjar*, the fallen warriors. Where the *valkyrja* in *Haraldskvæði* is described in terms of her fair looks, her wisdom and ability

to communicate with birds, the ones in *Eiríksmál* are described in terms of their social function: they are serving-maidens.<sup>62</sup> In both instances, the term *valkyrja* is used but in neither poem do these beings ‘choose the slain’, which gives the impression that the word is either applied broadly or that its meaning is more extensive than what can be understood from its etymology.

In Eyvindr skáldaspillir’s *Hákonarmál*, supposedly c.960 (ÍF, Vol. 26, p. xcii), however, the situation is different again, firstly because these *valkyrjur* have names — Gǫndul and Skǫgul<sup>63</sup> — and secondly because the description of them is quite different from the passages quoted above. The poem exists in *Hákonar saga góða* 32; stanza 1, also in *Skáldskaparmál* 2, reads as follows:

Gǫndul ok Skǫgul  
sendi Gautatýr<sup>64</sup>  
at kiósa of konunga,  
hverr Yngva ættar  
skyldi með Óðni fara  
ok í Valhǫllu vera.  
(ÍF, Vol. 26, p. 193; Snorri Sturluson, 1998, p. 8)  
‡  
Gǫndul and Skǫgul  
sent by Óðinn  
to choose from the kings  
who of Yngvi’s descendants  
should go with Óðinn  
and stay in Valhǫll.

Furthermore, stanzas 10–13 read as follows:

Gǫndul þat mælti,  
studdisk geirskapti:  
Vex nú gengi goða,  
es Hákonni hafa  
með her mikinn  
heim bǫnd of boðit.

Vísi þat heyrði,  
hvat valkyrjur mæltu  
mærar af mars baki.

Hyggiliga létu  
ok hjalmaðar sátu  
ok höfðusk hlífar fyrir.

Hví þú svá gunni  
skiptir, Geir-Skǫgul?  
Vorum þó verðir gagns frá goðum.  
Vér því völdum,  
es þú velli helt,  
en þínir fiandr flugu.

Ríða vit skulum,  
kvað en ríkja Skǫgul,  
græna heima goða  
Óðni at segja,  
at nú mun allvaldr koma  
á hann sjalfan at séa.  
(ÍF, Vol. 26, p. 195)

‡  
Gǫndul spoke,  
leaning on the spearshaft:  
‘Now increases the gods’ side,  
since the gods have  
invited Hákon  
with a great army.’

The prince heard that,  
what the valkyrjur said,  
maidens on horsebacks,  
they acted wisely  
and sat wearing helmets  
and held shields before them.

‘Why do you decide the battle  
in this way, Spear-Skǫgul?  
We were worthy of victory from the

gods.’ ‘We made it so  
that you held the battlefield  
and your enemies fled.’

‘We shall ride’,  
said the powerful Skoǵul,  
‘to the green home of the gods,  
to tell Óðinn  
that the king will now come  
himself to see him.’

There is a clear contrast between this portrayal of *valkyrjur* compared to the previous two — these ones carry weapons and ride horses and their connection to dead warriors, to Óðinn and to Valhøll is clear. They act like the ‘classic’ image of *valkyrjur*, those fierce female supernatural battle spirits who possess power over the life and death of warriors and who actively exercise those powers on the field of battle (Warmind, 1997, p. 91; Price, 2002, p. 331). They are present during the battle, sent by Óðinn to choose between the two warring kings which of them will go to Valhøll — or possibly to select the right one of them, which is not necessarily the same thing. There is an important difference between, on the one hand, choosing from several eligible candidates and, on the other hand, recognising and selecting the only correct one from a group of would-be candidates — like going to the railway station to identify the correct person to collect. With regard to the power which the *valkyrjur* have, it matters whether it involves volition (that they themselves decide whom to pick) or not (that they carry out orders from Óðinn and select whomever has been chosen by him).<sup>65</sup>

In these three descriptions, the *valkyrjur* share certain otherworldly qualities and a link to warfare and the dead, but it is also clear that etymology alone is not enough to gain a full understanding of them. *Valkyrjur* often appear in groups but, unlike *dísir* and *nornir*, many of them have names, even if this in most cases lends them only a token individuality. Generally, their names are little more than poetic words for battle, indicating strength, force, weaponry or noise: Hlökk (‘Ringing’, ‘Battle’), Gøll (‘Noise’), Þrúðr (‘Force’), Hildir (‘Battle’), Hjálmpřimull (‘Noise of helmets’), Gunnr (‘Battle’) and more. In skaldic poetry, such names often seem to occur as mere stock phrases with no hint of personality hiding behind them and it



may be that they were employed simply as a literary device on the same level as battle-kennings involving ravens and wolves.

Contrastingly, *valkyrjur* in heroic poetry are typically daughters of kings who, for reasons mostly unexplained, are leading a warrior type of life.<sup>66</sup> At times they travel through the air, at times on horseback, indicating again a link between supernatural women and horses. *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* shows a *valkyrja* travelling through the air in the prose passage between stanzas 9 and 10: *Eylimí hét konungur. Dóttir hans var Sváva. Hún var valkyrja og reið loft og lög* (There was a king called Eylimí. His daughter was Sváva. She was a *valkyrja* and rode the air and the sea). This information is repeated about Sigrún in the prose between *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 4 and 5 and it rather recalls a description of the horse Hófvarpnir in *Gylfaginning* 35, where it is said of the goddess Gná: *Hon á þann hest er rennr lopt ok lög, er heitir Hófvarpnir* (She has that horse, which runs in the air and across the sea, and which is called Hófvarpnir; Snorri Sturluson, 1987, p. 30; 2005, p. 30).

In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 17, Sigrún occurs again, this time on horseback: *En af hesti Hogni dóttir ... ræsi sagði* (From horseback Hogni's daughter ... said to the prince). It is easy to make the assumption that 'riding the air' means 'riding a horse through the air' but this is not necessarily what is meant — there could be other valid explanations.<sup>67</sup>

In heroic poetry, *valkyrjur* are apparently of human origin and they have clear personalities. Sigrdrífa and Brynhildr (who may originally have been distinct, but have apparently come to be regarded as the same character; see *Sigrdrífumál* and *Völsungasaga* 21–2) are typical examples. They are young, unmarried women who, for some reason, have become warriors and taken on an entirely masculine role and who then undergo dramatic changes back into a feminine role when they encounter the hero who loves them and become betrothed or married to him.<sup>68</sup> Rather than choosing (or selecting) the slain, they appear as protectresses of their chosen heroes (Quinn, 2006). Whether these human *valkyrjur* have their origins in social reality is questionable. Although *Íslendingasögur* provide some evidence for the acceptance, even approval, of women occasionally stepping into the masculine realm of behaviour,<sup>69</sup> it is also clear that this is unusual and potentially suspect behaviour from a woman. There is little historical evidence for women actually fighting as warriors.<sup>70</sup> What is significant about such

women here is that supernatural powers to grant or destroy life are conceived of in the female form of *valkyrjur* whose war-like and unruly nature lends them a sort of double identity: they are feminine in gender but masculine in behaviour.<sup>71</sup> It is not the intention here to discuss the cultural politics potentially involved in such portrayals of women<sup>72</sup> but rather to focus on the double-sided nature of powerful supernatural or mythical women.

The term *valkyrja* is used in such different contexts that it is difficult to grasp what the exact meaning of the word is. Warmind says that ‘The word *valkyrie* seems to be useable about any magical, active female’ (1997, p. 196) and distinguishes between several kinds of *valkyrjur*, primarily between, on the one hand, the clearly supernatural ones who carry names related to warfare, and, on the other hand, the romantic or heroic *valkyrjur* who carry names of a different kind (Sigrún, Kára, Sváva), which he also describes as shield-maidens. This distinction between ethereal, supernatural *valkyrjur* and more human shield-maidens makes good sense. Warmind further says: ‘I would argue that shield-maidens and valkyries have been thoroughly confused in the *Fornaldarsögur* — or rather that the distinction was not meaningful to the authors’ (1997, p. 196), which appears a valid observation.<sup>73</sup>

If ‘choosing the slain’ is what we should expect from them, then there are several *valkyrjur* who act in unauthorised manners, serving beer or talking to ravens instead. The explanation ‘chooser of the slain’, or perhaps rather ‘selecter of the slain’, is only a partial description of the meaning of the term *valkyrja*, one that can complicate attempts to detect sensible distinctions between them and other classes of beings.

## 2.2 Other Supernatural Female Figures

The rest of this chapter will introduce various other classes of female supernatural beings who all share certain features with the *nornir*, the *dísir* or the *valkyrjur*.

### 2.2.1 *Ásynjur* and Mother Figures

When the *nornir* are described in scholarship, they are often referred to as ‘goddesses of fate’. But this does not mean that they belong with the *ásynjur*, a term which describes the goddesses, the feminine counterpart to the masculine *æsir*, the gods. It depends, of course, on how one defines a ‘goddess’, but the Old Norse terms *ásynjur* and *nornir* do not appear to

describe the same two categories of female supernatural beings; *nornir* never seem to appear in mythological poems, and the exact relationship between them and the gods and goddesses is unclear.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, some of the *ásynjur* are of interest here, especially Frigg, because she is closely linked to ideas about fate.

In *Lokasenna* 29 Freyia says that: *ørlög Frigg hygg ec at öll viti, þótt hon sjálfgi segi* (Frigg, I think, knows all fate, though she herself does not speak). What is revealed here is partly that Frigg possesses special knowledge akin to that held by the *nornir*, even though she does not put that knowledge into words.<sup>75</sup> This is interesting because it means that, like a *völva*, she is capable of predicting the future; yet Óðinn, when he seeks knowledge about the future, for example about Baldr's fate in *Baldrs draumar*,<sup>76</sup> does not consult Frigg but instead a long-dead *völva*. Several interesting factors combine in Frigg's attempts to prevent the death of her and Óðinn's son, Baldr — she is Baldr's mother, she knows about fate and she does not speak about it. It may be possible to interpret her silence in such a way that, by not giving it shape in the form of words, Frigg is trying to prevent something from happening, rather like Ingimundr in *Vatnsdæla saga* 10 who thinks he can avoid his fate if only the *völva* keeps silent (see 5.3.1). The passage in *Lokasenna* 27–9 concerns exactly Baldr's death and it is interesting to note that there is some indication of a relationship between fate and spoken words. In stanza 28, Loki says that he is the cause of Baldr's death: *ec því ræð, er þú riða sérat síðan Baldr at sölum* (I [will] bring it about that you will not again see Baldr riding to the halls), to which Freyia replies, as quoted above, that Frigg knows all about fate, though she does not speak. There seems to be an underlying notion that spoken words can have deterministic powers — once said they cannot be unsaid, but become factors in shaping events that follow on afterwards (see 5.3 and 5.3.1). *Lokasenna* 27–9 are normally taken to refer to Baldr's death as an event in the past, not in the future, although it may, tentatively, be possible to read the passage both ways. The crucial point in this is the verb *ræð*. *Konungsbók* has the form *rēþ* (*rēð* or *rēþ*) and, in this manuscript, *ṛ* is used to denote both *æ* and *é* (KLE, Vol. 2, p. 443), which leaves it up to the reader to decide how it should be read. Both *rēð* and *ræð* are therefore possible and valid readings for *rēþ* and both are forms of the verb *ráða*, which has numerous shades of meaning — 'to interpret, understand, advise,

consider, plan' (Frtz, Vol. 3, pp. 9–17). In this particular instance it means something like 'to cause, to bring about'. *Réð* is the past tense whereas *ræð* is the present tense that can also be used to denote future tense. Cautiously, it is not impossible that Loki is either saying that he *brought* about Baldr's death (*réð*), that he is currently in the process of *bringing* it about or that he *will bring* it about (*ræð*), although I hasten to stress that it is rather more likely that he is simply stating that he is the cause of Baldr's death, in which case the grammatical tense of the verb has no implications for the past or future nature of the event described. Even so, Loki's talkativeness regarding Baldr's death combined with Frigg's silence about the same event may indicate a latent motif wherein Frigg's silence about fate could be seen as an attempt to prevent an event from happening.<sup>77</sup> Read in this way, *Lokasenna* 27–9 could relate rather closely to the motif of Frigg trying in vain to keep Baldr from harm.

Frigg's role as a mother recalls the Iron Age evidence for a mother-cult in the area which is now Germany. Roman-inspired votive stones and altars, originating between the first and fifth centuries ad and found in the area then occupied by the Romans, relate to such cults. They seem to represent cults of native ancestress figures, not Roman ones. The iconography shows almost exclusively groups of three female figures variously dressed as married women (wearing headdresses) and unmarried women (with loosened hair), carrying attributes relating to fertility, childbirth and occasionally warfare (Simek, 2003, pp. 11–13, 117–24). There are more than 500 votive stones with well over 100 different Germanic names or epithets, some of which relate to specific Germanic tribes, while others refer to the mothers as 'helpers in need' (recalling the *nauðgonglar* in *Fáfnismál* 12), and a few warrior goddesses (Simek, 1993, pp. 204–8). The blending together of birth and warfare is significant:

The idea behind this association lies in the old belief that the mother or deity that brings one to life is also responsible for all good or evil that the individual experiences in his life. (Giannakis, 1998–9, p. 25).

Apart from the votive stones, most of which are found on the Lower Rhine, Bede, in *De Temporum Ratione* 15, c.725, makes a reference to an Old English heathen festival called *modranecht* (night of the mothers), which was a midwinter celebration (Bede, 1999, p. 53).

These pieces of cult evidence are often seen as related to the cult of the *dísir* (Simek, 1993; McKinnell, 2005), and the *matronae* or mothers share concerns for fertility, childbirth and war with the *dísir* as well as with the *nornir*. Although the evidence is scattered over large geographical areas and spans a period of about a millennium, it seems plausible that these mother figures indicate some degree of continuity from much earlier periods into the Old Norse sources relating to the *nornir*. It is difficult to detect exactly what is the relationship between *dísir*, mothers and *nornir* from the evidence available, but the idea of a triad with each ‘mother’ apparently guarding her own area of concern strongly recalls the idea of three individually named *nornir* (see 3.1.2).

### 2.2.2 *Fylgjur*

*Fylgjur* are yet another type of female supernatural beings who share certain traits with *valkyrjur* and *dísir*.<sup>78</sup> The term *fylgja* is etymologically comprehensible. Raudvere says about these beings:

Benämningen kommer från verbet *fylgja*, att följa och är också besläktat med ordet för efterbörd, *fulga*; alltså något som kommer med livet självt och vidhäftar individen. Dessa var-  
elser uppträder som tydligt synliga i djur- eller kvinnogestalt,  
och deras uppenbarelseform har ofta en metaforisk innebörd  
då de kan agera som ett slags dubbelgångare. (Raudvere,  
2003, p. 61)

†

The designation stems from the verb *fylgja*, to follow and is also related to the word for afterbirth, *fulga*, that is, something which comes with life itself and is attached to the individual. These beings occur as clearly visible animal or female figures, and their appearance often has a metaphorical meaning as they can act as a sort of *doppelgänger*.

It is the female, rather than the animal version, that is of interest here.<sup>79</sup> Like *dísir*, *fylgjur* act as guardian spirits but, whereas *dísir* were the object of a cult, there is no evidence of such a connection with *fylgjur* (Turville-Petre, 1964, pp. 227–8; Ström, 1985 [1961], pp. 195–6). They occur predominantly as single beings and seem to be closely linked to the individual or to a family, embodying that person’s or family’s luck or destiny. Often, they are

spoken of, even seen, shortly before someone's death, as in *Hallfreðar saga* 11 where Hallfreðr falls ill on the way to Iceland:

Þá sá þeir konu ganga eptir skipinu; hon var mikil ok í brynju; hon gekk á fylgjum sem á landi. Hallfreðr leit til ok sá, at þar var fylgjukona hans. Hallfreðr mælti: 'Í sundr segi ek ǫllu við þik.' Hon mælti: 'Villtu, Þorvaldr, taka við mér?' Hann kvazk eigi vilja. Þá mælti Hallfreðr ungi: 'Ek vil taka við þér.' Síðan hvarf hon. (ÍF, Vol. 8, p. 198)

†

Then they saw a woman following the ship. She was tall and dressed in a mail-coat. She walked on the waves as if on land. Hallfred looked and saw that it was his fetch.

Hallfred said, 'I declare myself finally parted from you.'

She said, 'Will you take me on, Thorvald?'

He said he would not.

Then the boy Hallfred said, 'I'll take you on,' at which she disappeared. (CSI, Vol. 1, p. 252)

Several aspects here recall *valkyrjur* and *dísir* — that she is clad in a mail-coat and is walking across the water — but the element of transition is also clear, both Hallfreðr's transition from the living to the dead and the transition of the *fylgja* from one person to another, which, however, is not imposed by the *fylgja* but by the person's own choice. This could be an indication that she personifies a person's luck or fate. Whereas Þorvaldr will have nothing to do with her, the young Hallfreðr accepts her as his own, as though she belongs with him as a consequence of being named after the older Hallfreðr; such a clearly predetermined transition may not be evident in all cases where similar events occur, however.

The term can be used in more extensive senses (in *Piðrandi þátr ok Þórhalls* the words *dísir* and *fylgjur* both describe the same group of beings) but, unlike *dísir*, *valkyrjur* and also *nornir*, *fylgjur* as such do not appear to make decisions or choices and they may simply be embodiments of conceptual features (especially good luck) of the persons to whom they are attached. It may be coincidental that the vast majority of the *fylgjur* that are mentioned in the literature are attached to men, not women.

### 2.2.3 *Vqlur*

It is also important to mention *vqlur* in relation to the *nornir* as these two categories of female figures overlap in several ways. A clear-cut division between them is not easy to achieve, but one important distinction appears to be that *vqlur* are somehow communicative and accessible whereas *nornir* are neither.

The term *vqlva* supposedly relates to the noun *vqlr* (m.), ‘staff’, and means a ‘female staff-carrier’ (AeW, s.v. *vqlr*, *vqlva*; Hermann Pálsson, 1996, p. 15; Price, 2002, p. 112), perhaps hinting at some ritual item that such a woman carries with her.<sup>80</sup> Staffs are often symbols indicating high social status (Steinsland, 1991, pp. 163–8) and some very wealthy female graves containing staffs have been found. It is thought by some that these are the graves of *vqlur* (Price, 2006, pp. 118–19). *Nornir* do not seem to be connected to staffs in any of the sources<sup>81</sup> nor, indeed, to be involved in rituals, and this is a significant difference between them and *vqlur*. The staffs have been likened to spindles and distaffs by scholars who have seen a direct connection between fate and textile (Heide, 2006, pp. 250–3; Gardela, 2008, pp. 47–52).<sup>82</sup> However, the term *vqlva* seems equally well explained through relating it to the Indo-European root *uel-*, which has eight different meanings (Pokorny, 1959–69, s.v.). Among these meanings are ‘seeing’ (compare the Old Irish *fili*, ‘poet, seer’) and ‘tearing, wounding, bleeding’ (compare the Old Norse *valr*, ‘the slain’; Old Irish *fuil*, ‘blood’). The name of the Germanic prophetess Veleda in Tacitus’ *Historia* 4.61, 4.65 and 5.22 (1997, pp. 213–14, 216 and 246) supposedly links back to *uel-*, ‘seeing’.

The term *nornir* turns up primarily in battle poetry, heroic legends and mythological settings, whereas the term *vqlur* occurs predominantly in *fornaldarsögur*, *Íslendingasögur* and mythological poems. Furthermore, it seems that *vqlur* are mainly conceived of as human women carrying out certain rituals; *nornir* are never human (this only occurs in sources employing clearly confused terminology). *Nornir* rarely appear in person<sup>83</sup> but it is common for *vqlur* to do so, and it seems fair to say that *nornir* are generally conceived of as distant, intangible beings who go about their tasks somewhere beyond human reach while *vqlur*, where these are described as physically present in human society, represent a more comprehensible version of similar otherworldly knowledge. *Vqlur* nevertheless always retain some

otherworldly quality. In this way, *vǫlur* and *nornir* may actually represent rather similar notions, perhaps the very same notion, only in different formats or on different levels. In some sources, such as *Norna-Gests þáttur*, the terms are used with apparently interchangeable meanings but, although this makes it less than easy to draw any exact dividing lines between the two groups of beings, they should probably be regarded as similar rather than identical.<sup>84</sup>

*Vǫlur* fulfil similar roles on the divine and human levels of perception (Steinsland, 2005, p. 285); they are consulted by humans in the sagas and they are also consulted by the gods — or at least by Óðinn — in some mythological poems, notably *Baldurs draumar* and *Vǫluspá*. In *Íslendingasögur* they are typically portrayed as human women with special abilities so that they do not constitute a wholly supernatural category; the *vǫlva*, however, is always an outsider, not one of the group of people for whom she prophesies, which lends her strong connotations of otherness (McKinnell, 2005, pp. 95–100).<sup>85</sup> It is of interest that *vǫlur* do not turn up in contemporary sagas at all, as though they have no place in Christian society. McKinnell says: ‘In Icelandic prose texts, *vǫlur* seem to be a feature of the legendary or mythic past, not a social phenomenon in the present’ (2005, p. 99), and further: ‘This impression of lack of familiarity is reinforced by several *fornaldarsögur* which begin stories about *vǫlur* by explaining what a *vǫlva* was’ (2005, p. 98). Moreover, there is a high degree of agreement between different accounts of prophesying *vǫlur*, perhaps indicating that there was some sort of a standard proto-story of ‘the prophesying *vǫlva*’, and it seems reasonable to assume that *vǫlur* were not as frequent in reality as the accounts would have us believe, at least not in Iceland where there were no non-Icelandic peoples. The situation may have been different in Norway and Sweden because of the Saami.

Probably the best-known description of a *vǫlva* is found in *Eiríks saga rauda* 4:<sup>86</sup>

Sú kona var þar í byggð, er Þorbjörg hét; hon var spákona ok var kǫlluð lítill-vǫlva. Hon hafði átt sér níu systur, ok vǫlur allar spákonur, en hon ein var þá á lífi. Þat var háttir Þorbjargar um vetrum, at hon fór at veizlum, ok buðu þeir menn henni mest heim, er forvitni var á at vita forlög sín eða árferð; ok með því at Þorkell var þar mestr bóndi, þá þótti til hans koma at vita, hvé nær létta myndi óaráni þessu, sem yfir stóð. ... En er hon



kom inn, þótti öllum mönnum skylt at velja henni sæmiligar kveðjur. Hon tók því sem henni váru menn geðjaðir til. Tók Þorkell bóndi í hönd henni ok leiddi hana til þess sætis, sem henni var búit. Þorkell bað hana þá renna þar augum yfir hjú ok hjörð, ok svá hýbýli. Hon var fámálug um allt. ... Síðan gengu men at vísindakonunni, ok frétti þá hverr þess, er mest forvitni var á at vita. Hon var ok góð af frásögnum; gekk þat ok lítt í tauma, er hon sagði. (ÍF, Vol. 4, pp. 206–9)

✚

In the district there lived a woman named Thorbjorg, a seeress who was called the ‘Little Prophetess’. She was one of ten sisters, all of whom had the gift of prophecy, and was the only one of them still alive. It was Thorbjorg’s custom to spend the winter visiting, one after another, farms to which she had been invited, mostly by people curious to learn of their own future or what was in store for the coming year. ... When she entered, everyone was supposed to offer her respectful greetings, and she responded according to how the person appealed to her. Farmer Thorkell took the wise woman by the hand and led her to the seat which had been prepared for her. He then asked her to survey his flocks, servants and buildings. She had little to say about all of it. ... After that people approached the wise woman to learn what each of them was curious to know. She made them good answer, and little that she predicted did not occur. (CSI, Vol. 1, pp. 5–7)

In this account, the *völva* is clearly not one of the community but a visitor.<sup>87</sup> The fact that she is both a stranger and someone to whom the community turns in order to know more about themselves highlights that she is a figure who is powerful and important but at the same time extremely dangerous. What she represents is an otherworldly kind of knowledge that must be treated with respect and, as a consequence, so must she.

There are several overlaps between *völur* and *nornir*. Both are associated with special knowledge concerning the past as well as the future, and both seem to possess the ability to not only look into the future but apparently also determine its course. One significant difference seems to be that, whereas *völur* are mostly invited, asked or in some other way made to give

their predictions, *nornir* are not consulted but make their pronouncements uninvited.<sup>88</sup> In *Hávamál* 111, Óðinn (or whoever the protagonist is) comes to Urðarbrunnr but he states exactly that he remains silent, and the scene does not take the question-and-answer format that is common with prophesying *vǫlur*.<sup>89</sup> Urðarbrunnr is where the *nornir* are, and the stanza says that Óðinn just listens to what is said. At times, *vǫlur* appear very reluctant to speak about the events which they are able to see, although this does not hold for all situations. For example, the scene in *Vatnsdæla saga* 10 shows not a reluctant speaker, the *vǫlva*, but a reluctant listener, Ingimundr (see 5.3.1). There is little that indicates reluctance to make pronouncements on the part of *nornir*, but they also seem to operate on another level or at least without people overhearing them. Furthermore, it is typical of *nornir* (and *dísir*) to act in groups, as collective wholes (though singular *nornir* are not unheard of: *Reginismál* 2; Kveldúlfr; Kormákr), whereas *vǫlur* typically turn up in the singular form. There is usually only one *vǫlva* at work at any given time, although she needs helpers to perform her rituals (de Vries, 1956, p. 330).

### 2.3 Summary: Borderlines and Grey Areas

It is not easy to clearly tell all these different kinds of female supernatural beings apart, as they do tend to merge more or less into each other, yet without ever becoming entirely synonymous with one another. Simultaneously, confusion about exactly where the dividing lines are appears to have arisen at an early stage or perhaps those lines were always drawn differently by different people in different areas at different times. Disentangling *dísir*, *valkyrjur*, *nornir* and all the others from one another by the means of logic would be not only impossible but probably outright wrong. In all likelihood, people at the time did draw some lines, but not everyone everywhere drew the same lines all the time, which would make it doubly artificial to try to do this now. Frustrating as it is, this is simply the situation we are faced with.

Ström says about *dísir*:

Det ligger i sakens nature, att väsen som råder över så oberäkneliga, skickelsedigra och livsavgörande skeenden som äring och missväxt, livsfruktens liv och död, seger och nederlag i strid måste erhålla drag av ödesmakter, av makter som håller människans hela livsöde i sina händer. Om valkyrjorna kan säges representera den heroiskt-mytiska aspekten hos diserna,

representerar nornorna lika säkert deres ödesaspekt. (Ström, 1954, pp. 85–6)

‡

It is obvious that beings who control such unaccountable, fateful and life-deciding events as crop failure, the life and death of all living things, victory and defeat in battle must take on the character of powers of fate, of powers which hold the whole of human life in its hands. If the *valkyrjur* can be said to represent the heroic-mythical aspect of the *dísir*, the *nornir* represent their fatal aspect.

In scholarship, *dísir* has sometimes been regarded as an umbrella term for female supernatural beings of almost all kinds so that *nornir* and *valkyrjur* have been seen as subgroups of *dísir*, the way Ström puts it. To a certain extent such usage may be deemed correct, but many things speak against using any of the terms discussed here as an overarching description for all kinds of supernatural women, and doing so quickly becomes an artificial approach to the study of supernatural women in Old Norse tradition. It is inadvisable to say that *valkyrjur* are a type of *dísir*, and employing invented terms, such as *örlagadísir* for *nornir*, is not helpful either. The differences are too great — even if the dividing lines remain indistinct. At best we can hope that our endeavours will result in a little less confusion, but it must be kept in mind that logically applicable rules are unlikely ever to have existed.

Regarding *nornir*, *valkyrjur* and *dísir*, the *dísir* constitute the only group to which a cult was demonstrably attached. They never have names and may have been considered anonymous ancestress figures, although there is no direct evidence for this. Their cult had to do with fertility and death and it also contained certain legal aspects as is evident from the institution of the *dísaping* (see note 49).

*Valkyrjur* have a special link to warfare and to the realm of the dead but have little to do with childbirth and fertility. Nothing speaks of a cult of *valkyrjur*. They turn up as individuals as well as groups, often have names and are at times attached to individual warriors. Although the term *valkyrja* would seem to indicate an act of choosing or selecting, this is not a consistent feature of these beings and in the extant literature the term appears to be used in rather a broad sense.

*Fylgjur* are essentially linked to births and to ideas about protection, but they are embodiments of a person's characteristics or good luck rather than helping or deciding figures. They are the only ones who appear exclusively as singular figures.

*Nornir* appear to represent notions of inevitability in a broad and unapproachable sense; they are strongly linked to death and to ideas concerning judgement but also to transitions more generally. The relative absence of *nornir*, even when the word is used, may be one of their most recognisable features: they rarely appear in person but are referred to as beings that are out there somewhere, generally as a collective whole of unnamed figures but sometimes also as individuals. Only two sources attach names to individual *nornir*.

Thus, *nornir* and *dísir* would seem to come quite close to each other as collective groups attached to birth and death and with certain legal notions surrounding them, yet *dísir* appear so much more tangible and actually present in human life with *nornir* as more abstract figures looming in the murkier, often transitional, moments of life. Such dividing lines are valid as long as they are not regarded as absolute and impenetrable borders, even if they remain unclear; there are simply many overlaps and confusion inevitably arises in the grey areas in between. What unites them is the fact that *nornir*, *dísir*, *valkyrjur* and *fylgjur* all represent — in some way or other — an otherworldly power which both gives and takes life and which is conceptualised in female form.

## Notes to Chapter 2

- 1 There have been some moves in this direction recently, for example Ewing (2008, pp. 98–109), who bases most of his discussion of the *nornir* on *Norna-Gests þáttur* and attempts to find human representatives for the *nornir*. Ewing makes some interesting points, but is very selective in the sources he chooses to pay attention to.
- 2 AM 162 A 8 fol., c.1300 and other MSS.
- 3 Þórólfr died in a battle against Haraldr hárfagri (*Egils saga* 22; ÍF, Vol. 2, pp. 53–4).
- 4 Þundr is an *Óðinsheiti*, one of many synonyms for Óðinn (*Grímnismál* 54).
- 5 *Þórs fangvina* (Þórr's female fighting-friend) is a kenning for old age (LP, p. 121; see *Gylfaginning* 46).
- 6 *Codex Frisianus* and other MSS.
- 7 The name refers to a man called Hálfðan háleggr.
- 8 It can also mean that they 'divided correctly'.
- 9 *Króksfjarðarbók*, c.1350–70. Ingjaldr lived in the thirteenth century.
- 10 *Sturlunga saga* 351 (Örnólfur Thorsson *et al.*, 1988, Vol. 2, p. 542).
- 11 *Þing* refers to an 'assembly' or a 'meeting' but can also mean a 'love-relationship' (Frtz, s.v.).

- 12 For death as a sexual relationship with a supernatural woman, see Steinsland (1997, especially pp. 97–123).
- 13 *Möðruvallabók*, c.1330–70, and other MSS.
- 14 AM 61 fol., c.1350–75, as well as other MSS of *Óláfs saga Tryggvassonar en mesta*, has Njorðr; *Möðruvallabók* has Freyr, which is probably inaccurate as it destroys the expected alliteration between *neyddr* and *Njarðar*.
- 15 I am grateful to Tarrin Wills for supplying me with the text of this inscription and to Judy Quinn for bringing it to my attention in the first place. The first part of the inscription translates fairly easily while the second part is much more problematic (Liestøl *et al.*, 1962; Liestøl, 1964, p. 28), but the general meaning is clear enough: the poem is about the power that love of a woman can have over a man. For a direct translation of the text, I would tentatively suggest: ‘Turned to the beautiful fir-tree, / harmful one [dangerous woman], early on for me, / of the fish-ground’s [sea’s] fastened flame [gold], / the ancient wind of cliff-*nornir* [thoughts]; / that mind has Óðinn’s / thorn-quern [giant-woman?] of the battle[?]-shelter [*valkyrja*?], / horse of the giant-woman’s bridle [wolf], / held by magic’.
- 16 Upps UB R 715, c.1650. Earlier MSS of the saga (AM 544 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1300–25; Gks 2845 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1450) do not contain this stanza, which occurs in Chapter 14 of the saga in FSN, Vol. 2, p. 67, and is reckoned as the final stanza, 34, of *Hlqðskviða* (Neckel, 1962, p. 312) from c.800.
- 17 *Eggmóðr* (edge-tired) probably means tiredness from loss of blood rather than from physical exertion during the battle.
- 18 Gísli Sigurðsson (1998, p. 364) suggests that *í gær* should perhaps be understood as ‘tomorrow’ in spite of the usual meaning of ‘yesterday’.
- 19 *Kviðr* has two meanings (both masculine): ‘stomach’ and ‘verdict’, particularly in court cases (Frtz, s.v.).
- 20 The juxtaposition of *Hamðismál* 30 with *Hávamál* 77 is important. Whereas *Hamðismál* 30 states that no one outlives the decree of the *nornir*, *Hávamál* 77 states that the only thing which never dies is the reputation of each dead man — but both stanzas employ the same quasi-legal imagery: *kviðr* and *dómr* respectively. However, whereas *kviðr norna* refers to the death itself, the ending of a life in accordance with fate, *dómr um dauðan hvern* refers to the everlasting reputation of the deceased, be it good or bad, that will live on in human memory. In both stanzas, it is clearly the human judgement which is of importance, rather than the supernatural one — you will die regardless; what matters is what people will say about you.
- 21 *Sturlunga saga* (Örnólfur Thorsson *et al.*, 1988, Vol. 1, p. 410); *Króksfjarðarbók*, c.1350–70.
- 22 The Corrector of Burchard of Worms, c.1008–12, refers in Chapter 5.151 to a German folk belief in werewolves connected to the Fates: ‘Hast thou believed what some are wont to believe, either that those who are commonly called the Fates exist, or that they can do that which they are believed to do? That is, that while any person is being born, they are able even then to determine his life to what they wish, so that no matter what the person wants, he can be transformed into a wolf, that which vulgar folly calls a werewolf, or into any other shape’ (McNeill and Gamer, 1990, p. 338). This is a far cry from Sqrli’s heroic dismissal of wolves as those who fight among themselves but, if nothing else, it proves that such a belief must have existed in Germany at the time (otherwise there would be no need to prohibit it). Although it is not a reference to the Old Norse *nornir*, it does establish a clear link between the Fates and birth situations in a Germanic context.
- 23 Interestingly, troll-women are often portrayed with close connections to wolves:

- Gylfaginning* 49 has Hyrrokin riding a wolf to Baldr's funeral and in *Hyndluljóð* 5 Hyndla rides a wolf, both of these recalling the Hunnestad picture stone in Skåne (Raudvere, 2003, pp. 34–5). *Gylfaginning* 12 echoes the same idea. Perhaps we are to understand *norn* in *grey norna* as a *heiti* for a troll-woman. The image would then draw on a connection between *nornir* and troll-women not unlike the mention of *skjaldar norn* in *Ólafsdrápa Tryggvasonar* 18 (which, incidentally, recalls *Ragnarsdrápa* 11 where the axe kenning *hveðra brynju* (mail-coat's troll-wife) occurs, cited in *Skáldskaparmál* 50; Snorri Sturluson, 1998, 73). Closely related to this are the skaldic kennings that refer to Hel as 'wolf's sister', indicating the kinship between Hel and Fenrisúlfr as children of Loki (Abram, 2006, pp. 11–19). See also note 55 in Chapter 3.
- 24 I am grateful to Vilborg Davíðsdóttir for this suggestion.
- 25 This is a frequently used motif in saga material: conflict arises due to an individual's opposing loyalties. *Íslendingasögur* often focus on how the individual reacts in such situations. The reasons for a conflict may fade into the background and a person is measured according to how they behave when put on the spot (see Meulengracht Sørensen, 1993).
- 26 All references to *Volsungasaga* are to Grimstad (2000), from Nks 1824 b 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1400–25.
- 27 In *Volsungasaga* 21–2 (Grimstad, 2000, pp. 146–55) Brynhildr plays the part attributed to Sigrdrífa in *Sigrdrífumál*. Furthermore, she has a past as a *valkyrja*.
- 28 *Útiseta* (sitting outside) is the practice of sitting outside in the night in order to conduct magic; Keyser and Munch (1846–95, Vol. 1, p. 19, Vol. 2, p. 497); Finnur Jónsson (1892); de Vries (1956, pp. 328–30); Ström (1985 [1961], p. 227); Price (2002, pp. 168–9).
- 29 Urðarbrunnr, 'spring or well of fate' in *Völuspá* 19; *urðar megin* (power or force of fate) in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 21; *urðar máni* (fateful moon) in *Eyrbyggja saga* 52; *urðar orð* (words of fate) in *Fjölsvinnsmál* 47; *urðar lokur* (fate's or woman's calling song) in *Grógaldur* 7. Finnur Jónsson suggests 'unyielding decisions of fate' for *urðar lokur* (LP, s.v.). I find 'woman's calling song', suggested by Mitchell (2001 [2004], pp. 69–70), more convincing, but see also Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (2001).
- 30 *Aringreypom* (hearth-encircling), an obscure word found only in *Atlakviða*.
- 31 ÁBM, p. 321, suggests *hervi* means 'to harrow', working the soil. The English metaphorical use of this, meaning 'to ravage', does not work here because Old Norse has separate verbs for these two meanings: *herja*, 'to ravage', and *hervi*, 'to harrow'.
- 32 Perhaps understood as 'doing slave work' (Jón Helgason, 1962, p. 154; Dronke, 1969, p. 58; Clunies Ross, 1970).
- 33 McKinnell *et al.* (2004, p. 140) say that 'The name of the rune n (nauð) seems to have meant originally "need; destitution", but also "strong (sexual?) compulsion", and probably also "fetter, captivity". Whatever its meaning originally was ..., it clearly became associated through the name of the rune with the rune itself, and the alliterative formula níu nauðir 'nine nauðs' was used as a charm for warding off evil.'
- 34 About the loose G-rune, McKinnell *et al.* (2004, p. 130) suggest this: 'The single g ... may have been the beginning of the verb *gerðu*, with the carver then realising that he had already used this verb and that skapa would be preferable. The Christian context and the cruciform shape of the inscription make it seem unlikely that Thorir believed in the norns as more than a figure of speech.'
- 35 Olav's mass eve falls on 28 July (Olsen, 1957, p. 150).
- 36 Nks 1824 b 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1400–25. The poem is dated to c.1200 (Finnur Jónsson, 1905, p. 183/33).
- 37 Very similarly phrased lines occur in *Baldrs draumar* 12: *hveriar ro þær meyar, er at muni gráta, oc á himin verpa, hálsla scautom* (who are those maidens that weep for love and who throw skywards the corners of their head-dresses); and *Vafþrúðnismál* 48: *hveriar ro þær*

- meyiar, er líða mar yfir, fróðgeðiaðar fara* (who are those maidens that journey in troops, wise in spirit, over the sea). There are three similar stanzas among the riddles of Gestumblindi in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* 10 to which the answers are ‘the waves’, so it is by no means certain that *Baldrs draumar* and *Vafþrúðnismál* refer to the *nornir*.
- 38 *Völsungasaga* 18 has: *hverjar erv þær nornir er kiosa maug(u) fra meðrum* (who are those *nornir* that deliver sons from their mothers; Grimstad, 2000, p. 140). Both phrases strongly recall *Sigrdrífumál* 9: *leysa kind frá konom* (release children from women), where separation also seems to be the issue. The phrases are probably formulaic.
- 39 This strongly recalls the name of the Saami birth-goddess Sarakka, supposedly deriving from a verb *saret* (to cleave), who is said to separate the child from its mother at birth (Ränk, 1955, pp. 21–2).
- 40 In *Oddrúnagrátr* 9 Frigg and Freyia are called upon to help at birth (see 2.2.1 on Frigg), in *Sigrdrífumál* 9 *dísir*. On Frigg and Freyia, see Grundy (1996); Ingunn Ásdísardóttir (2007).
- 41 I am grateful to John Lindow for this observation.
- 42 In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and in the late *Norna-Gests þátr* the *nornir* are associated with the birth scene, but they are present to determine the child’s fate, not to assist during the birth (KLE, Vol. 5, p. 431).
- 43 I am grateful to Tom DuBois for this reference.
- 44 Nothing is said about what happens if the third peg is gone. It is interesting to note that one peg is black, one is white and the third one is different (see 2.1.2 and note 56). Saxo uses a similar idea in the story of Ericus and Rollerus, *Gesta Danorum* Book 5 (2.6–2.7), where Craca prepares a meal for her son Rollerus and stepson Ericus. Rollerus (though logically it should be Ericus) happens to see her: ‘Surveying the interior, he spied his mother stirring an ugly-looking cauldron of stew. He looked up and saw also hanging aloft from a thin rope three snakes, from whose jaws putrid saliva dripped steadily to provide liquid for the recipe. Two of them were pitch black, the third had whitish scales and was suspended a little higher than the others’ (Saxo Grammaticus, 1979–80, Vol. 1, p. 124). As a result, one half of the food is black, the other white; the dark food contains special powers and Craca intended it for Rollerus, but Ericus eats it and thereby gains knowledge, eloquence, magical protection in combat as well as the ability to understand animal languages.
- 45 *Sigrdrífumál* 15–17 lists many things to cut runes on, including Sleipnir’s teeth, a wolf’s claw, an owl’s beak. The purpose of the runes is not stated but they seem to be cut for protection.
- 46 The *nornir* are portrayed as being beyond physical presence or actions. Their decisions, judgements and words are manifested in human actions while they themselves remain intangible. So it is also with spoken words, they do not have a physical form, they only exist at the moment of speaking but their effects will continue to be felt long after, especially if they are malicious words.
- 47 Strömbäck (1949), Ström (1954) and Gunnell (2004a [2000]) focus more specifically on *dísir*. See also Turville-Petre (1964, pp. 221–7), Simek (1993, pp. 60–2), Raudvere (2003, pp. 68–9) and McKinnell (2005, pp. 197–200).
- 48 The term *norn* occurs as a kenning for woman — *nesta norn*, ‘norn of the brooch’ in one of Egill Skallgrímsson’s *lausavísur* (*Egils saga* 56; ÍF, Vol. 2, p. 156) — as does possibly the name *Urðr* — *urðar lokur*, ‘woman’s calling song’ or perhaps ‘magical incantation’ in *Grógaldur* 7 (Mitchell, 2001 [2004], pp. 69–70). In *Skáldskaparmál* 31, Snorri says: *Kona er kend við allar Ásynjur eða nornir eða dísir* (Kennings for woman can be any of the *ásynjur* or *nornir* or *dísir*; Snorri Sturluson, 1998, p. 40).

## The Norns in Old Norse Mythology

- 49 *Egils saga* 44 and *Víga-Glúms saga* 6 mention *dísir* in connection with the Winter Nights (an autumnal celebration at the start of winter); *Ynglingasaga* 29 seemingly in connection with spring. The early fourteenth-century Swedish landscape law *Upplandslagen* refers to *disæpinx friþær* (truce of the *dísaping*), and *disæpinx dagh* (day of the *dísaping*), which seems to have fallen sometime in the early spring. The *dísaping* was a legal assembly linked to a market, indicating a legal connection for the *dísir* (Hultman, 1916, p. 169)
- 50 This line strongly recalls *Fáfnismál* 12: *kiósa mæðr frá mögom* (separate mothers from sons).
- 51 Cutting runes on the palm of the hand at birth is also referred to in *Sigrdrífumál* 16: *á lausnar lófa* (on hands that deliver).
- 52 All references to *Gísla saga* are to the shorter of the two versions; AM 556 a 4°, c.1475–1500.
- 53 Unless this is how we are meant to understand the verb *vekia* (awaken) in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 38.
- 54 Sigmundr, incidentally, is killed at the intervention of Óðinn in the next sentence.
- 55 From *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta* in *Flateyjarbók*, c.1387–95.
- 56 The Scottish legend about Michael Scot contains a detail extraordinarily similar to Þiðrandi's death. About Michael Scot it is said that: 'On his death-bed he told his friends to place his body on a hillock. Three ravens and three doves would be seen flying towards it; if the ravens were first the body was to be burned, but if the doves were first it was to receive Christian burial. The ravens were foremost, but in their hurry flew beyond their mark' (Campbell, 1900, p. 288). The black and white birds are interesting in so far as ravens in Old Norse tradition are associated with Óðinn, battlefields and corpses. The doves are a Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit, but they are also significant as white birds in opposition to, yet somehow equal to, the black ravens (see 2.1.2 and note 44).
- 57 Loumand (2005) discusses the horse in this role.
- 58 Further on *valkyrjur*, see Simek (1993, pp. 349–50); Warmind (1997, pp. 86–110); Egeler (2009).
- 59 *Hymis hausreytir* (skull-pecker [skull-opener] of Hymir) is a kenning for a raven (LP, s.v.).
- 60 That she understands bird speech reveals that she is otherworldly or has access to otherworldly knowledge. In *Fáfnismál* 32–8, knowledge otherwise hidden is revealed to Sigurðr through bird speech.
- 61 The continued emphasis on her fairness brings out a clear colour contrast between her whiteness and the black raven with blood on its beak and claws. The colour scheme of black, white and red recalls the Irish story of Deirdre (ÓhÓgáin, 1990, p. 155; MacCana, 1996 [1968], pp. 94–7; MacKillop, 2004 [1998], pp. 132–4), but it is also common in folktales such as *Snow White* (ATU, p. 709). The black and white contrast occurs also with the *dísir* in *Þiðranda þáttr*, the birds in the Michael Scot legend and the pegs in the Sarakka-porridge (see notes 44 and 56).
- 62 This also means that they are under male control, like *valkyrjur* who act at the orders of Óðinn. The *valkyrja* in *Haraldskvæði* seems different in this respect (unless she is to be seen as acting at the instigation of the male poet).
- 63 *Göndul* looks like a feminine version of *Göndlir*, an *Óðinsheiti* (*Grímnismál* 49); both relate to *göndull* (m.), 'magic wand; male organ' (AeW, s.v.) and to *gandr* (m.), 'stick, staff; magic; wolf' (AeW, s.v.; LP, s.v.). See also McKinnell (2005, p. 151). *Skögul* translates as 'battle' (AeW, s.v.; LP, s.v.) and relates to the verb *skaga*, 'to jut out, project from the surroundings' (Frtz, s.v.; AeW, s.v.).



- 64 *Gautatýr* is an *Óðinsheiti*.
- 65 I am grateful to John Lindow for pointing out this important distinction to me. In *Sigrdrífumál*, it is clear that the *valkyrjur* are expected to select the candidates wanted by Óðinn and not choose for themselves, since Sigrdrífa is punished for doing exactly that. See also Chapter 5, note 18.
- 66 Saxo says that some women themselves have chosen this way of life, although their reasons for doing so are rarely clear, for example Lathgertha in *Gesta Danorum*, Book 9 (4.2). Aluilda in Book 7 (6.3) became a warrior through the malicious influence of her mother who disliked her suitor.
- 67 In later folk tradition, beings such as witches may ride just about any object through the air. A horse is not a requirement for doing so (Price, 2002, pp. 119–22).
- 68 See Holmqvist-Larsen (1983) for a discussion of shield-maidens, and the role of women in general, in *Gesta Danorum*, Book 7.
- 69 *Fóstbræðra saga* 1 introduces Þorbjörg digra, who governs the district while her husband is away; she rides to the *þing* and saves a man from hanging; *Laxdæla saga* 1–7 tells the story of Unnr (elsewhere Auðr), who acts as the head of her family and travels to Iceland where she claims land and settles.
- 70 Tacitus (*Germania* 7–8, in 1970 [1948], pp. 107–8) mentions that women (and children) would accompany men to the battlefield and encourage them from the sideline but without partaking in the fighting. However, archaeology has revealed a number of female graves, which clearly contain weapons.
- 71 Ney (2004) provides a discussion of women, mythical and historical, who cross the gender barrier in such ways.
- 72 Jochens (1996) and Helga Kress (1993, 2002) discuss such issues.
- 73 Similar difficulties of interpretation surround the Old English *wælcyrrie*, etymologically identical to Old Norse *valkyrja*, which is said to gloss a Fury, a Gorgon, Bellona (Roman goddess of war), or which may be used generally about a witch or sorceress (Bosworth, 1898, p. 1153). On the latter usage, however, Mitchell (2001 [2004], p. 70) objects that ‘this gloss on late Anglo-Saxon uses is debatable, as there is no information other than the association with witch (i.e. the collocation itself) to imply that the word means “sorceress” or anything like it’, and goes on to discuss whether the concurrence of *wælcyrrie* with ‘witch’ is due to a fondness for alliterative pairs in Old English text sources rather than to shared meaning.
- 74 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1999, p. 51) says: ‘The old Nordic concept of fate ... resembled a blind law, superior to god and man, that could at any time impose on their lives. The main difference in the position of gods and men seems to have been that it was clearer to the gods than to men what fate bore in its lap.’ See also Clunies Ross (1994, p. 246).
- 75 The same phrase is used about Gefjun in *Lokasenna* 21, where Óðinn says about her: *aldar orlog hygg ec at hon öll um viti iafngorla sem ec* (I believe she knows all about men’s fates as well as I know this myself). Nothing is said about how or whether Gefjun employs this knowledge. The parallel Óðinn draws between Gefjun and himself is interesting, and it may be of some significance that Gefjun knows all about ‘the fate of men’, whereas Frigg knows all about ‘fate’ as such. Perhaps there is a difference in perspective, or perhaps the two figures may have originated as separate versions of the same one figure.
- 76 The story of Baldr is told in *Gylfaginning* 49 and *Gesta Danorum*, Book 3; it is furthermore alluded to in *Völuspá*, *Baldrs draumar* and *Lokasenna*.
- 77 In *Lokasenna* 27 Frigg tells Loki that he would not get away with his slander if her son

Baldr were present, which is an odd remark, and certainly not much of a threat, if Baldr is already dead at this point. If her comment is to be regarded as a threat to Loki, then it must be because he is still alive. Yet the opposite can also be argued from her use of the subjunctive ‘if I had ... a boy like my son Baldr’, which indicates that Baldr is dead rather than simply not present.

- 78 For a fuller discussion of *fylgjur*, see Mundal (1974).
- 79 Animal *fylgjur* are mentioned in *Njáls saga* 23 where Gunnarr’s *fylgja* is a bear, and in *Vatnsdæla saga* 42 where Þorkell silfri’s *fylgja* is a red horse signalling his impending death; both are seen in dreams. Mundal (1974) shows that, whereas animal *fylgjur* embody the qualities of the person to whom they are attached, the woman *fylgjur* act as protectresses.
- 80 From this, Pokorny (1959–69, p. 1140) derives the name Waluburg, a Germanic seeress of the Semnoni mentioned in a second-century classical source (Simek, 1993, pp. 370–1). The name of another seeress, Ganna (Simek, 1993, p. 99), is usually interpreted as connected to Old Norse *gandr*, ‘(magical) staff’, as is Gambara, mentioned in *History of the Langobards* I 8. Gambara is, supposedly, \**gand-bera*, ‘staff-bearer’ (Simek, 1993, pp. 98–9).
- 81 However, the connection between *gandr* and wolves on the one hand and between *nornir*, troll-women and wolves on the other hand may provide a link (see notes 22 and 23).
- 82 Enright (1990) sees the staff as a weaver’s beam, arguing primarily from the Irish *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and from bracteates depicting staff-carrying figures; his arguments, however, are selective. I agree that there is something to the fate-as-textile metaphor (see 3.1.1 and 4.1.2), but the bracteates are not incontestable evidence for this.
- 83 It does nonetheless happen, as in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning*.
- 84 The very late poem *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* (also known as *Forspjallsljóð*), Holm papp 15 8°, c.1650–1700, refers in stanza 1 to *nornir* as one of several types of heathen supernatural beings (*álfar*, *vanir*, *þursar*, *valkyrjur*, etc.). Here, it is said of the *nornir* that they ‘reveal’ — *visa nornir* — which is an unusual verb to use with the *nornir* and may be more reminiscent of what *völur* do in prophesying rituals; it recalls the term *vísendakona* used about a *völva* in *Eiríks saga rauða* 4. It may, however, also reflect the verb *vekja*, ‘awaken’, employed in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 38. *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* is usually discredited as a useful poem for studying Old Norse tradition on account of its lateness and linguistic inaccessibility. There have, however, been recent attempts to re-evaluate the usefulness of it (Lassen, 2006; see also Eysteinn Björnsson and Reaves, n. d.).
- 85 She can be a Finn or Saami woman, for example in *Vatnsdæla saga* 10 (see *Laxdæla saga* 35 where it is specified that Kotkell and his family are not locals but incomers from the Hebrides).
- 86 AM 557 4°, c.1420–50.
- 87 The unfamiliarity between her and the community may be further enhanced by setting the scene in faraway Greenland, which must have been an unfamiliar place to most people, not unlike Lapland.
- 88 In Saxo’s account of Friddleus (*Gesta Danorum*, Book 6), it remains unclear whether the ‘*Parcae*’ should be regarded as *völur*, *nornir*, *disir* or some amalgamated version. It is noteworthy that Friddleus goes to a temple and that he gives something in return for the prophecy made to his son.
- 89 It is somewhat doubtful whether Óðinn was the original protagonist of this stanza in *Hávamál* (McKinnell, 2007, pp. 102–3).

## The Women in the Well

The sections in this chapter discuss particularly the references to *nornir* found in *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*, which, in certain ways, differ from those discussed above. This is evident firstly in that these two sources attach names to the *nornir*, or at least to some of them, secondly in that they describe the dealings of the *nornir* in remarkably positive or at least neutral ways, and thirdly in that they pay particular attention to the well or spring as the place of origin for the *nornir*. These are the three main topics discussed below. The *nornir* are popularly conceived of as a group of three, yet, although there is some evidence for this enumeration, most sources do not specify their exact number but simply refer to *nornir* in the plural. This does not in itself constitute an argument against the idea of three *nornir*, but the importance of actually reading what the sources say must be stressed and the lack of consistency regarding this point is noteworthy (see also Hall, 2007, pp. 22–3).

A major issue also discussed in this chapter is the question of why fate is so decidedly and consistently portrayed as female — either represented by female figures or associated with feminine types of work.

### 3.1 Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld

Much of what is said about the *nornir* in scholarship focuses on *Völuspá* 19–20, *Gylfaginning* 15–16 and the names given in these two passages. For reasons that will become clear, it is obvious that both passages are important to our understanding of the *nornir* but that they simultaneously raise several questions.

#### 3.1.1 The Names

In most instances, the *nornir* are simply referred to as *nornir* — a collective group of beings who, like the *dísir*, are not goddesses as such and do not seem to have individual personalities.

*Völuspá* 19–20, however, brings us face to face with three enigmatic female characters:

Asc veit ec standa,  
heitir Yggdrasill,  
hár baðmr, ausinn  
hvíta auri;  
þaðan koma döggar  
þærs er í dala falla;<sup>1</sup>  
stendr æ yfir, grænn  
Urðar brunni.

Þaðan koma meyar,  
margs vitandi,  
þriár, ór þeim sæ  
er und<sup>2</sup> þolli stendr;  
Urð héto eina,  
aðra Verðandi,  
— scáro á scíði —<sup>3</sup>  
Sculd ina þriðio.  
Þær lög lögðo,  
þær líf kuro  
alda bœnom,  
œrlög seggia.  
‡

I know an ash that stands  
called Yggdrasill,  
a tall tree, watered  
with white silt;  
from there come the dews  
that fall in the valleys;  
it stands eternally, green  
over the well<sup>4</sup> of Urðr.

From there come maidens,  
knowledgeable of many things,  
three, from that lake

which stands under the tree;  
 one they called Urðr,  
 another Verðandi,  
 — they carved on slips of wood —  
 Skuld the third one.  
 They laid down laws,  
 they chose life  
 for the children of men,  
 the fate of men.

This is the *Konungsbók* rendition of the poem, c.1270, which varies slightly from the version in *Hauksbók*, c.1300–25. In *Hauksbók*, the third line of stanza 20 reads *þrjár, ór þeim sal* (three from that hall) instead of *þrjár, ór þeim sæ* (three from that lake). *Hauksbók* thus gives a hall as the place that the three maidens come from, whereas *Konungsbók* gives a lake; both are situated below the tree. Further, *Hauksbók* renders the last line as *ørlog at segia* (fate to speak) where *Konungsbók* has *ørlog seggia* (fate of men). This discrepancy will be discussed in 5.3.

The passage in *Völuspá* states that these *meyjar* are very knowledgeable, that they lay down laws, that they choose life for the children of men and choose men's fate, and also that they are involved in some kind of carving on wood. These three women are most often taken to be *nornir*, but the use of the less specific noun *meyjar* leaves at least the option that they could be something else. The description given in *Völuspá* 19–20 could, arguably, fit most of the female figures connected to watery places and fate that are discussed below (see 3.2.2 and 3.2.3). The interpretation of them as *nornir*, however, clearly accords with what Snorri states in *Gylfaginning* 15:

Þar stendr salr einn fagr undir askinum við brunninn, ok ór þeim sal koma þrjár meyjar þær er svá heita: Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld. Þessar meyjar skapa mönnum aldr. Þær kōllum vér nornir. Enn eru fleiri nornir, þær er koma til hvers manns er borinn er at skapa aldr ... Góðar nornir ok vel ættaðar skapa góðan aldr, en þeir menn er fyrir ósköpum verða, þá valda því illar nornir. (Snorri Sturluson, 2005a, p. 18)

‡

There stands there one beautiful hall under the ash by the well, and out of this hall come three maidens whose names are

Weird, Verdandi, Skuld. These maidens shape men's lives. We call them norns. There are also other norns who visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives ... Good norns, ones of noble parentage, shape good lives, but as for those people that become the victims of misfortune, it is evil norns that are responsible. (Snorri Sturluson, 1987, p. 18)

Snorri's description falls in two parts, as if he is referring to two separate classes of *nornir*: first those who have names, then those who have parentage and are either good or evil. The impression is almost of a hierarchy with three 'chief *nornir*' at the top and, further down, 'lesser *nornir*' who do the footwork of visiting newborn children. However, since Snorri uses *Völuspá* as his source, *Gylfaginning* does not help to explain why *Völuspá* is different from any other independent source. Whatever intention lies behind the division is hard to understand but Snorri may have rationalised the concept of *nornir* into subdivisions; the idea of *nornir* having parentage of a sort is supported by *Fáfnismál* 13, and that of good and bad ones is reminiscent of the black and white *dísir* in *Þiðrandi þáttir ok Þórhalli*. Yet this division is not evident in references to *nornir* outwith *Snorra-Edda* and *Fáfnismál*.<sup>5</sup>

The three names Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld — in that order — occur together in only these two texts, which means that it is not a particularly common constellation. The names Urðr and Skuld occur independently in a few other places. Urðr, or forms thereof (genitive *urðar*, plural *urðir*), appears in fifteen or sixteen instances, either as the name of a *norn* or in compounds where it has the meaning of 'fate' or 'fateful'; Skuld occurs in four instances outwith *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*: as a *norn* or perhaps simply as abstract 'fate' in *Grógaldur* 4, as a *valkyrja* in *pulur* (Snorri Sturluson, 1998, p. 115), as a *heiti* for a woman in a *lausavísa* by Egill Skallagrímsson,<sup>6</sup> and as the evil half-sister of Hrólf in *Hrólf's saga kraka*.<sup>7</sup> The diversity of characters named Skuld is impressive: a *norn*, a *valkyrja*, a woman and an evil witch. The interesting thing is that the evil characteristics to a large degree persist across this range of Skuld figures and that they are predominantly physically present figures with whom people can interact, unlike the common portrayals of *nornir*.

In English editions of the *Edda*, the names are often translated. Larrington (1996, p. 6) calls them Fate, Becoming and Must-be, whereas McKinnell (1994, p. 117) gives Fate, Existence and Debt. Faulkes (Snorri

Sturluson, 1987, p. 18), with minimal interpretation, uses *Weird*, *Verdandi* and *Skuld*, and Byock (Snorri Sturluson, 2005b, p. 26) gives both the ‘original’ forms *Urd*, *Verdandi* and *Skuld* alongside translations: *Fate*, *Becoming* and *Obligation*. All of these are valid attempts at translating the names while also nearing some sort of explanation of the nature of the beings behind them, though one must keep in mind that translation always involves some degree of interpretation. The semantic content of a word is translatable but it is rarely possible to simultaneously convey the same set of associations as those conjured up by the word in its original language. This means that difficult choices often have to be made in the process of translation, not least because the semantic content of a word may undergo significant changes over time so that it may in fact be far removed from its etymological root meaning, as Weber (1969, p. 11) notes:

Die Etymologie ist ein fragwürdiges Mittel zur Erschließung einer konkreten religiösen oder weltbildhaften Vorstellung; sie kann stets nur Stütze, nie aber Rückgrat der semantischen Interpretation sein.

‡

Etymology is a questionable means of accessing a concrete idea relating to religion or world view; it can only remain a supporting tool, never the backbone of a semantic interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

It is not uncommon to read the three names as conveying a representation of past, present and future<sup>9</sup> respectively, and a closer look at two Old Norse verbs reveals how such interpretations are reached.

Some dictionaries give two versions of Old Norse *urðr* (LP, s.v.; AeW, s.v.): a masculine form supposedly meaning ‘misfortune, death’, and a feminine form (also C/V, s.v.), meaning ‘fate’ or referring to a *norm* named *Urðr*, although it is uncertain whether this distinction is genuine (Kure, 2010, pp. 229–30). *Urðr* is etymologically cognate with Old English *wyrd* (see 5.1) and is probably connected to the verb *verða*, ‘to happen, come to pass, take place’ (IeW, p. 145). The past plural (third-person) form of *verða* is *urðu*, describing those things which ‘came about’ or ‘did happen’, and the similarity in sound between *urðr*, ‘fate’, and *urðu*, ‘happened’, is perhaps what has given rise to the interpretation of *Urðr* as ‘Past’.<sup>10</sup> ‘Past’ as a chronologically bygone period of time, however, is not especially close to the semantic content of the noun *urðr* as it occurs in the literature.<sup>11</sup>

There is broad agreement regarding the name Verðandi as a relatively recent addition to the trinity of named *nornir*. It, too, is connected to the verb *verða* of which it is the present participle form and thus translatable as ‘happening, becoming, taking place now’, yielding the interpretation ‘Present’ (LP, s.v.; C/V, s.v.).

The name Skuld is related to the noun *skuld*, meaning ‘debt’ or ‘something owed’; in Christian interpretation it came to mean ‘guilt’ as well (LP, s.v.). It is related to the modal verb *skulu*, cognate with English ‘shall’, and has a range of different meanings: ‘shall, must; bidding, need, duty, obligation’. This verb carries, among other meanings, a sense of events to come and it can be used to create a periphrastic future tense (there is no non-periphrastic future tense in Old Norse), hence the interpretation ‘Future’ (Frtz, s.v.; LP, s.v.; C/V, s.v.). However, one might add that ‘debt’ also indicates something in the past, when the debt was incurred, not only in the future, when it has to be paid back.<sup>12</sup> The noun *skuld* is, at any rate, rather far removed from the semantic meaning of ‘chronological future’.

It seems to be these etymologically based interpretations of the three named *nornir* that have given rise to viewing them as representatives for, respectively, past, present and future. The most noteworthy aspect of this interpretation is that it probably goes back as far as Snorri and the author of *Völuspá*; the inclusion of the name Verðandi and Snorri’s reference to one *norn* as the ‘youngest’ appear to indicate this (Simek, 1993, p. 237). The interpretation cannot therefore be discarded altogether, but it must be emphasised that it is a reading, which is closely connected to those three names, and that certain reservations arise concerning this understanding of them.

As mentioned, the name Skuld appears elsewhere as the name of a *valkyrja*. *Völuspá* 30 mentions her and five other *valkyrjur*.<sup>13</sup> *Gylfaginning* 36 describes her as a cross-over figure, both *norn* and *valkyrja*: *Guðr ok Rota ok norn in yngsta er Skuld heitir ríða jafnan at kíósa val ok ráða vígum* (Gunn and Rota and the youngest norn, called Skuld, always ride to choose who shall be slain and to govern the killings; Snorri Sturluson, 1987, p. 31). The other two names relate to battle activities: Gunnr (or Guðr, depending on which manuscript is cited) means ‘war, battle’ (Frtz, s.v. *Gunnr* and *Guðr*), and Rota, ‘heavy downpour’ (Frtz, s.v.), usually of rain but as a *valkyrja* name probably of arrows or spears. Here, Skuld not only appears in a different group of three, this one consisting of *valkyrjur*, but is also



seen to participate in the battle itself which, judging by the fact that Snorri specifies this, appears to be something that he regards as unusual behaviour for *nornir* in general: neither Urðr nor Verðandi are said to do this. Skuld is also given an age, being ‘the youngest *norn*’, a statement that seems based on an understanding of her as representing the future, which is yet to come and is therefore ‘younger’ than the present and the past. But this is as close as she gets to the ‘future’ she supposedly represents. While it is possible to read a specific type of event that will happen in the future into the associations surrounding Skuld, namely death, there is no general sense of a ‘time to come’ attached to her. The notion of death would also go rather well with her concerns for the battlefield as one of the places where *valkyrjur* and *nornir* are likely to merge in issues of life and death.<sup>14</sup> There is no reason to believe that *skuld* contains associations of a chronological period to come or represents the concept of future as such. To regard this figure as a representative for the ‘Future’ is a highly selective reading of the name and the way in which this figure is described. If anything, she comes close to Nemesis — a menacing, threatening figure representing the consequences of previous events or actions that will inevitably catch up with the individual in the end.

It may simply have to be granted that Skuld spans that grey area where *nornir* and *valkyrjur* overlap. Warmind (1997, p. 197) notes, and rightly so, that it is a little odd that only one *norn* is mentioned in the long lists of *valkyrjur* — why not the others? Skuld is singled out as being unlike other *nornir*, giving her an individuality in a group of otherwise faceless beings, and so it would seem fair to regard her as an unusual *norn*, if a *norn* at all; possibly one that has metamorphosed into something else or has been incorporated from elsewhere. At the same time, this merging also shows that, certainly around the time when *Völuspá* was composed, *nornir* and *valkyrjur* were seen as very closely related and overlapping groups of beings.

The name Verðandi occurs only in these two texts, *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*, Snorri having probably derived it from *Völuspá*. There is little to say about her as an independent character; the fact that her name is exactly the present-participle form of *verða* definitely points towards a temporal interpretation of the *Völuspá-nornir*, but it also makes her appear as little more than a grammatical link between the ones that supposedly represent the past and the future. The transparent relationship between the name and the verb *verða* would seem to point in the direction of a relatively recent name rather

than an ancient one, though this may say little about the age of the character hiding behind the name. Holtsmark (1951, p. 88) suggests that the name has been made up *ad hoc* simply in order to complete an ideological triple figure and this may well be the case as nothing else is known about her.

The name *Urðr*, on the other hand, is certainly old and is closely linked to the Old Norse concept of fate: ‘*Urðr* ... is ... without doubt the power of destiny in which ancient people generally believed’ (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 1999, p. 47). The name tends to occur in the genitive form, either with ominous content such as the *urðar máni* (‘fateful moon’) in *Eyrbyggja saga* 52<sup>15</sup> that appears on the wall one evening and is regarded as a death omen, or with some other mysterious meaning such as *urðar magni* (‘fateful power’) in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 21. It is etymologically cognate with Old English *wyrd*<sup>16</sup> and with Old High German *wurt*, both meaning ‘fate’ and both probably stemming from the Indo-European *\*wert*, which means ‘to twist’ and is related to Latin *vertere*, ‘turning’ (de Vries, 1956, p. 270; IeW, s.v. *\*wert*). As Giannakis says: ‘The semantic development of words meaning “turn” into the semantic sphere of “be, happen”, also with reference to terminology pertaining to fate, appears to be quite common’ (1998–9, p. 100). What is interesting is that *wyrd* occurs with conspicuous frequency in Old English literature — some 200 instances — but Old High German *wurt* merely once and Old Norse *urðr* some fifteen or sixteen times (Weber, 1969, p. 17; see also 5.1).

This etymological basis is often taken to provide a link between fate and spinning, a very prominent image not only in the popular imagination but also in scholarship. It is, however, a connection that is in danger of bypassing the semantic development of both verbs, *verða* and *spinna*, as it is uncertain when ‘turning around rapidly’ became the semantic content of ‘spinning’. The original meaning of ‘to spin’ is ‘to draw out, pull out’ (AeW, s.v.; Pokorny, 1959–69, s.v.) — for example, a spider spins by ‘drawing out’, not by ‘turning around’, and the earlier meaning is retained in certain contexts: something ‘spindly’ is slender and elongated; it is not turning around. The problem here is the relationship between etymology and semantic content. There is no evidence that a form of the verb *verða* has ever been used to describe the activity of spinning as in ‘creating threads’, and if spinning was conceived of as ‘drawing out’ rather than ‘turning around’ then the *urðr*–*verða*–spinning constellation falls apart. In English, the first recorded

instance of ‘spinning’ used in the sense of ‘revolving, whirling round’ occurs in 1667 (OED, s.v. *spin*), and such a late date indicates that ideas about how *urðr* and *spinna* relate to one another may have to be revised. Spinning is related to fate but in ways other than through *verða*, *vertere* and *\*wert* (see 5.1). Moreover, the *norn* named *Urðr* is never portrayed as having links to spinning or to other forms of textile work at all. While this does not make it possible to dismiss a link between *Urðr* and spinning outright, the evidence for it is at best tentative.

While there seems to be a genuine etymological relationship forming the constellation *urðr–verða*–turning, there is no indication that *urðr* carries associations either of ‘spinning’ or of ‘the past’.<sup>17</sup> *Urðr*’s relationship to the past may well be similar to that of *Skuld* to the future, because what was laid down or came into being in the past has obviously influenced events following on from that; in the same way a debt not only has to be paid later on, it has to be incurred first. Thus, these two names that, supposedly, divide into ‘the past’ and ‘the future’ do not actually cover the temporal concepts in a way which clearly separates them from one another — both can be seen to incorporate certain aspects of chronological past and future.<sup>18</sup> The names *Urðr* and *Skuld* do not by themselves convey the temporal meaning of ‘past’ and ‘future’ and it seems that the idea of the *nornir* as representatives of time hinges on *Verðandi*, the one whose name looks like a recent addition and of whom so little is known. The trinity of names is ‘in all likelihood not very old’ (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 1999, p. 47).

It may be, however, that the three *nornir* should be regarded as a three-in-one figure, as a collective whole or as one *norn* representing all three ages — past, present and future — at once.<sup>19</sup> Fate is a supratemporal concept and as such it is all ages at once, not just a single one. As far as fate is concerned, past and future are not dissimilar but are, indeed, connected manifestations of the same underlying truth (see 3.1.3).<sup>20</sup>

The temporal interpretation may be regarded as present in *Völuspá*, although the names can obviously also be understood simply as ‘fate’, ‘existence’ and ‘debt’. If *Verðandi* is truly an *ad hoc* addition then it may be the poet’s intention to create an additional layer of meaning to the names *Urðr* and *Skuld*, a connection that can (but need not necessarily) be made, namely the temporal understanding, without erasing the ‘original’ meanings of ‘fate’ and ‘debt’.<sup>21</sup>

The temporal understanding of the *nornir* does not seem to occur outwith *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda* and this makes it somewhat problematic. It does not appear to be the original underlying conception of *nornir* and its occurrence in *Völuspá* may be an illusion created by later reinterpretation.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.1.2 The Number Three

Concerning the trinity of *nornir*, it is true that the *nornir* have a strong tendency to appear in the plural as a collective group of beings instead of easily distinguished individuals, but the number of *nornir* in the group is rarely specified. Three is a good suggestion but so is nine.<sup>23</sup> *Völuspá* may name three because this poem at several points concerns itself with groups of three, even when the beings referred to clearly belong to groups larger than three: in stanza 17 it mentions three *æsir* and in stanza 18 three *þursa meyar*, ‘giant maidens’,<sup>24</sup> but it seems unlikely that we should understand from this that there are only three *æsir* and only three *þursa meyar* (unless these are specifically interpreted as Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld, which is not impossible; Kure, 2010, pp. 282–4). It is more probable that *Völuspá* refers to three contextually significant members of those groups, in which case that would also be the case for the three *meyjar margs vitandi* mentioned in stanza 20. It has to be remembered, however, that these groups of three recall the votive altars dedicated to three mother figures, the *matronae*, although these stem from a much earlier date and from outwith the Norse-speaking area.

It is interesting that Snorri not only mentions three named *nornir* but also states that there are other *nornir* too; this may be an attempt to incorporate contradicting traditions while maintaining that the information given in *Völuspá* is correct. *Fáfnismál* 13 reflects both ideas: that there are three entities and that there are more than three *nornir*:

Sundrbornar<sup>25</sup> miȝc  
 segi ec at nornir sé,  
 eigoð þær ætt saman;  
 sumar ero áskungar,  
 sumar álfkungar,  
 sumar dætr Dvalins.<sup>26</sup>  
 †  
 Of different origins  
 are the nornir, I say,

they are not related;  
 some are of the *æsir*,  
 some are of the *álfar*,  
 some are the daughters of Dvalin.

The fact that *Fáfnismál* states in the plural that ‘some’ are of this group and ‘some’ of that group indicates that there are more than three *nornir*; otherwise it would state that there is ‘one’ of this kind and ‘one’ of that kind. The formulaic *sumar ... sumar ... sumar ...* of this stanza strongly recalls the *suma ... suma ... suma ...* list of supernatural women in the Old High German *First Merseburg Charm* (Lindquist, 1923, pp. 17–18; Giangrosso, 2001; see also 4.2). In fact, the impression given by *Fáfnismál* 13 could also be that the term *norn* describes some sort of occupation rather than a separate race of beings, as the *nornir* are said to be of the *æsir*, the *álfar* and the *dvergar*. The stanza could refer to three families of *nornir* (Holtsmark, 1951, p. 88; Lindow, 2001, p. 245) so that *dverga-nornir* attend the birth of dwarves, *ása-nornir* those of *æsir* and so on (although see Kragerud, 1981, pp. 14–15). However, it may also be that *nornir* have merged with *völur*, who emulate *nornir* by making prophecies and by being able to access knowledge hidden from most people. It is furthermore possible that *Fáfnismál* lists three kinds of *nornir* because this was traditional in certain contexts, such as in the much older *First Merseburg Charm*.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the enumeration of the *nornir* in *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda* may be influenced by classical tradition, which portrays a number of beings rather like *nornir* and often, though by no means always, as triple. The parallel most commonly drawn is to the *moirai*,<sup>28</sup> but Greek tradition provides another, more striking, example of a three-in-one figure in the form of Hekate. Although she belonged with the Titans, Hekate was accepted into the group of Olympian gods where she was a highly honoured, if somewhat uncouth, goddess. Her domain was the night, her animal was the dog and she was also worshipped as a fertility goddess; she seems to have encompassed a similar set of benign and evil associations as is attached to the *dísir* and *nornir*. She was connected to roads and journeying, possibly primarily journeying to the world of the dead (Rudebeck, 2002, p. 179). Statues of her were displayed at crossroads and they sometimes consisted of three female bodies, sometimes of a pole with three masks, each facing in a different direction so as to enable Hekate to look in all directions at once (Hjortsø, 1984, pp. 19–20).

This triple goddess to some extent recalls both Urðr and Hel, who overlap with one another. Hel is the female ruler of the underworld, but the term is also the name of that realm. Interestingly, eddic poetry employs the name predominantly to designate the realm, whereas skaldic poetry uses it mainly to describe the female figure (Abram, 2006, pp. 4–22). She shares with Urðr (or the *nornir* in general) an underground realm, a concern for the dead and her femininity, but she is not directly linked to the concept of fate. The most detailed description of her and her realm is Snorri's in *Gylfaginning* 34, which portrays her as being controlled by Óðinn, and which appears strongly coloured by the Christian conception of Hell. In the poetic material, 'Hel was not associated with a good death, or a bad death, or with any mode or method of dying in particular' (Abram, 2006, p. 26): she and/or her realm simply symbolise death as such. Hel also has a triple aspect to her, although this is less developed for her than for the *nornir*: she is one of three children of Loki and the giantess Angrboða, her brothers being Fenrisúlfr and Miðgarðsormr.

It may be that the three *nornir* of *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda* constitute an Old Norse version of beings similar to Hekate, the *moirai* and the *akkas*. They do not correspond exactly to one another; there are no exact cross-cultural parallels but nor would one expect any. Each geographical and chronological entity conjures up its own figures with their specific associations. Even within the Old Norse cultural area and period, ideas about the *nornir* may have varied from one region to another, even if the same word was used. There is a strong tendency for them to occur as a group consisting of an unspecified number of individuals whereas the number three is only mentioned in two instances.

There are, however, other occurrences of three supernatural female figures who are related to the *nornir*. An example is found in *Norna-Gests þáttur* 11,<sup>29</sup> although it is difficult here to distinguish between supernatural and human prophecy makers as the text employs a range of different terms to describe the women concerned. This story is a Norse version of the birth of Meleagros.<sup>30</sup> It is of interest for the terminology it employs:

Þar fór þá um landit völr, er kallaðar vāru spākonur ok spāðu  
mönnum aldr. Því buðu menn þeim ok gerðu þeim veizlur ok  
gāfu þeim gjafir at skilnaði. Faðir minn gerði ok svā, ok kómu  
þær til hans med sveit manna, ok skyldu þær spā mér örlög. Lá

ek þá í vögg, er þær skyldu tala um mitt mál. Þá brunnu yfir mér tvau kertisljós. Þær mæltu þá til mín ok sögðu mik mikinn auðnumann verða mundu ok meira en aðra mína foreldra eða höfðingja syni þar í landi ok sögðu allt svá skyldu fara um mitt ráð. In yngsta nornin þóttist of lítils metin hjá hinum tveimr, er þær spurðu hana eigi eftir slíkum spám, er svá váru mikils verðar. Var þar ok mikil ribbalda sveit, er henni hratt ór sæti sínu, ok fell hún til jarðar.

Af þessu varð hún ákafa stygg. Kallar hún þá hátt ok reiðiliga ok bað hinar hætta svá góðum ummælum við mik, — ‘því at ek skapa honum þat, at hann skal eigi lifa lengr en kerti þat brennr, er upp er tendrat hjá sveinum.’

Eftir þetta tók in ellri völvun kertit ok slökkti ok biðr móður mína varðveita ok kveykja eigi fyrr en á síðasta degi lífs míns. Eftir þetta fóru spákonur í burt ok bundu ina ungu norn ok hafa hana svá í burt, ok gaf faðir minn þeim góðar gjafir at skilnaði. (FSN, Vol. 1, p. 333)

†

Then there were vǫlur travelling about the country, who were called spaewives and who foretold men's lives. For that reason, people used to invite them to attend feasts and give them gifts when they left. My father also did so and they came to his place with a flock of people and they were to prophesy my fate. I lay in the cradle and they were to foretell my destiny. There were two candles burning above me. They then spoke and said that I would be a very lucky person and more so than both of my parents or any chieftain's son in the country and they said that such would be the long and the short of my lot. The youngest norn thought she was not appreciated by the other two as they did not ask her to give a prophecy of such importance. There was also a group of thugs there that pushed her off her seat so that she fell to the ground.

Therefore she was very angry. She called out loud and in an angry manner and told the other two to stop saying such favourable things to me, — ‘because I lay down for him that he shall not live longer than the candle burns, the one which is lit beside the boy’.

After that the older *vǫlva* took the candle and put it out and bade my mother take care of it and not light it until on the last day of my life. After this the *spæwifes* went away and bound the young *norn* and then took her away like that, and my father gave them good farewell-gifts.

The description strongly recalls the *vǫlva* in *Eiríks saga rauða* 4 and the women are probably best understood as *vǫlur*. The phrase ‘there were *vǫlur* travelling about, who were called *spæwifes*’ serves to underline that the terminology employed is loose at best and *Norna-Gests þáttir* is alone in employing the term *norn* for this sort of physically manifest figure; elsewhere such prophetesses are referred to as *vǫlur*, *spákonur*, *seiðkonur* or *vísindakonur*, but not as *nornir*.<sup>31</sup> Yet it may not be entirely coincidental use of terminology. Only one of them is referred to as a *norn*, namely in *yingsta nornin* (the youngest *norn*), and it is significant that the one who is singled out as a *norn* is also the troublesome one who wishes to shorten the boy’s life; it is after all the word ‘*norn*’ that takes on the meaning ‘witch’.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the association of *nornir* with death, suffering and bad luck was predisposed to dominate their image from heathen times onwards.

The one who is the *norn* is also said to be the youngest, recalling Snorri’s phrase in *Gylfaginning* 36 — *norn hin yngsta er Skuld heitir* (the youngest *norn* who is called Skuld’) — where Skuld is also described as going to the battlefield in the company of *valkyrjur*, which singles her out in relation to the other *nornir*. There is a correspondence between *norn hin yngsta* and *in yngsta nornin*, who, also in *Norna-Gests þáttir*, is singled out as different from the other two.

This singling out of one of the three women makes the women in *Norna-Gests þáttir* very different from triple figures such as Hekate and the *Vǫluspá-nornir*, because these triple figures are based on the principle that they represent three aspects, not as separate entities but by virtue of being all three at the same time, in one entity. From a philosophical viewpoint, this appears to be how the concepts of fate and time cross each other in Old Norse mythology, portraying past, present and future not as separate from but rather as heavily intertwined with one another (see 3.1.3). *Norna-Gests þáttir* portrays a much less abstract level of thinking.

A similar story is told in *Gesta Danorum*, Book 6 (4.12), where two women make favourable prophecies about Fríðleuus’ son, Olauus, whereas



the third, evil one makes an unfavourable prophecy:

Mos erat antiquis super futuris liberorum euentibus Parcanum oracular consultare. Quo ritu Fridleuus Olaii filii fortunam exploraturus, nuncupatis solenniter uotis deorum eides precabundus accedit, ubi, introspecto sacello ternas sedes totidem myphis occupari cognoscit. Quarum prima indulgentioris animi liberalem puero formam uberemque humani fauoris copiam erogabat. Eidem secunda beneficii loco liberalitatis excellentiam condonauit. Tertia uero, proteruioris ingenii inuidientiorisque studii foemina, sororum indulgentiorem aspernata consensum ideoque earum donis officere cupiens futuris pueri moribus parsimonię crimen affixit. Ita aliarum beneficiis tristioris fortunę ueneno corruptis accidit, ut Olauo pro gemina munerum ratione permixta liberalitati parcitas tribueret cognomentum. Quo euenit, ut prioris indulgentię suauitatem inserta beneficio nota confunderet. (Saxo Grammaticus, 2005, p. 378)

†

It was the custom among the ancients to consult the oracles of the fates concerning the future lives of their children. Fridlef intended to investigate the fortunes of his son by this ritual, and having offered solemn vows approached the goddesses' temple in prayer; here, peering into the shrine, he recognised the three maidens sitting in their respective seats.<sup>33</sup> The first indulgently bestowed on the boy a handsome appearance and a plentiful share of men's good-will. The second presented him with abundant generosity. The third, a woman of rather petulant and jealous disposition, spurned the unanimous favours of her sisters and, in a wish to mar their blessings, implanted the fault of meanness in the boy's future character. That was how Olaf, when the others' benefits had been vitiated by the mischief of a gloomier destiny, received a name from the two types of offering, niggardliness mixed with liberality. So it was this blemish, conferred as part of the gift, upset the sweetness of the earlier kindness. (Saxo Grammaticus, 1979–80, Vol. 1, p. 169)

The terms used by Saxo, *Parcae* and *nymphis*, ‘Fates’ and ‘maidens’, suggest that the classical Fates were known in the Old Norse cultural area around 1200 when he was writing, even if perhaps only to Latin-educated people. Like *Norna-Gests þátttr*, the story recalls the folktale motif employed in stories of the Sleeping Beauty type (ATU 410): the last of a number of supernatural or magically capable women gives an evil prediction in an attempt to cancel out the good predictions made by her fellow prophetesses. This may also be what is influencing Snorri’s description of the ‘third’ norn, Skuld, as well as his division of *nornir* into subgroups of good ones and bad ones; there is little evidence that the idea that some *nornir* are evil while others are good is a stable idea going back to ancient times (de Vries, 1956, p. 271).

The women in Saxo’s account, like those in *Norna-Gests þátttr*, seem more reminiscent of *völur* than of *nornir* and, while there are no finite definitions of what *völur* and *nornir* are, it may be wise to allow for a certain amount of *interpretatio christiana* or *interpretatio romana* by Saxo of whatever native traditions were still known in Denmark in his time.

In terms of the worship described here, Fridleuus offers ‘solemn vows’ after which the women ‘bestow’ on the boy, ‘present’ him with and ‘implant’ in him certain qualities. Presumably the scene is imagined as spoken, possibly accompanied by certain actions, but there is little indication of exactly what Fridleuus does or what vows he offers. It is clear that he gives something in return for the prophecies, as *völur* receive gifts in return for their prophecies in *Íslendingasögur*, but these seem to be material gifts (sometimes food) rather than verbal promises.

Neither *Norna-Gests þátttr* nor the Fridleuus story can really be taken as evidence for the notion of there being three *nornir* in Old Norse tradition, although they obviously support it. The idea of three *nornir* may be very old, as the Germanic votive altars may indicate, though the literary sources do not reflect this. Yet the three names, Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld, do not appear to constitute an ancient set (see de Vries 1956, pp. 272–3).

### 3.1.3 Fate and Time<sup>34</sup>

Following on from the above discussions of Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld and their links (or lack of such) to past, present and future, an exploration of the relationship between fate and time is in order, as is a definition of exactly

what fate is.<sup>35</sup> Such a definition is not easily approached through positive defining (saying what fate is) but can be reached through negative defining (starting by saying what fate is not).

The first thing to note is that fate is not time; these are two separate concepts that interlink in certain ways but which ultimately originate in very different experiences. Time is concerned about *when* things happen and this is not really what is meant by fate. Fate can be, but is not necessarily, a question about timing; there is much more to it than mere calendar and chronology. The timing of sunrise and sunset can be worked out in advance, the seasons come and go in familiar patterns, Thursdays always precede Fridays; these are predictable time sequences. It is true that time, like fate, is indifferent to our concerns as human beings — Thursday precedes Friday whether it rains or not, whether we notice or not, whether we are living or dead. But time provides only the stage, not the action. A person's fate may be played out on a Thursday or a Friday — but it cannot *be* a Thursday or a Friday. We can only experience fate over the course of time for the simple reason that we, as human beings, can only experience anything at all inside of time. But this is not what we refer to as fate:

Fate stands outside of all comprehended nature and hence outside of time: 'Time may show, / But cannot alter, what shall be. / Events will take their way. Even as the prophet's words foreshadowed all.' [Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 250–4, 1959, p. 51] (Winterbourne, 2004, p. 18)<sup>36</sup>

The next thing to note is that fate is not causality. Causality is concerned with *why* things happen and with working out the cause and effect of events. Causality operates on the premises of logic because it demands a reason — there is a logical relationship between an action carried out and the effects felt by it afterwards; fate needs neither reason nor logic.

That fate is, however, a supratemporal concept, seems to have been understood implicitly by many mythologies. Since causality itself has nothing to do with time but instead gives *directedness* to time for human consciousness, the 'three-body problem' reduces to no problem at all: for time  $\neq$  fate, causality  $\neq$  time, and fate  $\neq$  causality. Causality's concern is *that* something happens — not *when* it happens. (Winterbourne, 2004, p. 18)

Fate may be the metaphysical answer to why something happens, but it is not necessarily the logical, intelligible or rational answer.<sup>37</sup>

Rather than *when* or *why*, fate seems to be concerned simply about *what* happens and the fact *that* it happens. In a sense, fate is a question of truth, of actuality — not of what *could* or *should* happen, but what *does* inevitably happen. The baffling point about this is that, in the eyes of fate, so to speak, the distinction between past, present and future falls away because they are all the same; they are chronologically separate manifestations of the truth — but the truth remains the same regardless of what time period it is found in. This is why it is a misunderstanding to represent fate as three separate individuals concerned with each their chronological period. It can, however, be represented as three chronologically separate manifestations of the same figure (as in the case of Hekate). The five-year-old girl I used to be and the seventy-year-old woman I will (hopefully) become one day are both me, and they are just as true representations of me as my current thirty-five-year-old self is. Whereas time distinguishes between the three versions of me, fate says that they are all the same. And whereas time says that these three versions of a person can never be simultaneously present in one place, at one time, fate says that this is irrelevant — they are all one. The fact that I have no way of knowing anything about my future self is a matter of time rather than of fate. ‘Fate cannot be calculated, although it was often thought that it could be divined: for it has to do with intuition, not calculation’ (Winterbourne, 2004, p. 18).

Fate, then, is neither a logical nor a chronological concept; it has more in common with the modern scientific understanding of DNA.<sup>38</sup> It is an internal truth, a kernel, which is in itself constant and timeless, but which can only be expressed in external experience — just as the warp of a fabric can only be actualised through the interaction of the weft. What this means for the individual person is that their actions constitute not only manifestations of their conscious decisions but also a revelation of their inner truth; regardless of when or why a person does something, that action is a truthful expression of who he or she really is. If he tells lies, then it is because the truth about him is that he is a liar. If she keeps on changing her mind, then it is because the truth about her is that she is fickle. You cannot escape being who you are — your fate is to live with the decisions that you, being true to your own personality, make, will make and have made.<sup>39</sup> Even so, this

perceived lack of freedom does not mean that you are not held responsible for what you do.

Without the experience of time you cannot have the experience of fate. But that does not make them the same experience. The former provides only the stage on which the action takes place, whereas the latter provides the script for the play. The play is actualised over the course of time — and the fact that the script has already been conceived, albeit unbeknownst to the actors who partake in the action — is not of chronological significance. It exists outwith the stage setting altogether as a given even before the play begins and even after it has finished.

### 3.2 Dark and Humid Places

The following discussions focus on the well of Urðarbrunnr out of which the *nornir* are said to emerge, according to *Snorra-Edda*, *Völuspá* and *Kormákr*, and on comparisons of the well to places like it, which are linked to beings overlapping with the *nornir*. In this, both versions of *Völuspá* (*Konungsbók* and *Hauksbók*) are regarded as important and, in fact, as mutually supportive in certain ways.

#### 3.2.1 Urðarbrunnr

The well beneath Yggdrasil is called Urðarbrunnr and is a place of great significance. *Gylfaginning* 15 states that *Priðja rót asksins stendr á himni, ok undir þeiri rót er brunnr sá er mjök er heilagr er heitir Urðar brunnr. Þar eigu guðin dómstað sinn* (The third root of the ash extends to heaven, and beneath that root is a well which is very holy, called Weirð's well. There the gods have their court; Snorri Sturluson, 1987, p. 17; 2005a, p. 17). The importance of Urðarbrunnr appears to be echoed in *Hávamál* 111: *Mál er at þylia þular stóli á, Urðar brunni at* (There are words to recite from the wise one's seat, at the well of *Urðr*). In *Gylfaginning* 15, Urðarbrunnr also seems to have significance in a legal or quasi-legal sense, being both the assembly place, even court (*dómstaðr*), of the gods and the place of origin of the *nornir* and of fate. The place occupied by the *nornir* in the Old Norse conceptual world appears to have been significant, as Lindow (2001, p. 245) points out: 'The skald Hallfred Óttarson vandræðaskáld coined the expression "long-maintained fates of the norms" to refer to the paganism he abandoned when he converted to Christianity.' Hallfreðr's *lausavísa* is

interesting for the central role it allocates the *nornir* in the heathen belief system, and this is matched by the centrality of Yggdrasill, the *axis mundi*, and of Urðarbrunnr, a judicial centre for the gods.<sup>40</sup>

The gloomy vision of stern *nornir*, which is the one most readily detected in the literary evidence, is, however, not the one promoted by *Völuspá* 19–20, nor by Snorri in *Gylfaginning* 16:

Enn er þat sagt at nornir þær er byggja við Urðar brunn taka  
hvern dag vatn í brunninum ok með aurinn þann er liggr um  
brunninn, ok ausa upp yfir askinn til þess at eigi skyli limar  
hans tréna eða fúna. (Snorri Sturluson, 2005a, p. 19)

✚

It is also said that the norns that dwell by Weird's well take  
water from the well each day and with it the mud that lies  
round the well and pour it up over the ash so that its branches  
may not rot or decay. (Snorri Sturluson, 1987, p. 19)

Snorri describes the *nornir* as nurturing the tree of life, Yggdrasill, and the same is implied in *Völuspá* 19, although here the *nornir* are not said to be actively tending the tree. Although this active portrayal of the *nornir* may simply be Snorri's attempt to explain why Yggdrasill is said to be *ausinn hvíta auri*, 'watered with white silt', in *Völuspá* 19, it serves to indicate their motherly, life-sustaining aspect, furthering life and ensuring its continued growth. Nourishing the roots of the tree of life is an image that conveys rather well the power and importance of these underground women — life depends on them.

As mentioned above, the two renditions of *Völuspá* differ slightly in the details concerning Urðarbrunnr: *Konungsbók* refers to a lake,<sup>41</sup> *Hauksbók* to a hall. Snorri, after mentioning the well, says that a hall stands beneath the tree and that the *nornir* come out of this hall, thus combining the idea of a well with that of a hall.

The well is also mentioned in two pieces of skaldic poetry, one by Kormákr and one by Eilífr. In a line ascribed to his *Sigurðardrápa*, allegedly c.960 (Skj BI, p. 69–AI, p. 79) but found only in *Skáldskaparmál* 49, Kormákr Ögmundarson says *komsk Urðr ór brunni* (Urðr rose from the well; Snorri Sturluson, 1998, p. 70). This phrase is easily paired with the one in *Völuspá* 20: *þaðan koma meyar* (from there come maidens). Kormákr uses the image of Urðr coming from the well as one of several mythological allusions, one at the end of each stanza of *Sigurðardrápa*,

seemingly providing analogues to his descriptions of events in the human realm (Skj BI, p. 69–AI, p. 79). Given the links between *nornir* and warfare elsewhere in skaldic poetry, it is striking that Kormákr picks Urðr for a stanza describing exactly warfare. The fact that all his other mythological allusions concern mythical persons points to an understanding of Urðr as a person, too, rather than as a purely conceptual version of fate. That she rose from the well could furthermore be taken to indicate that the well is primary and she is secondary (Weber, 1969, pp. 149–54); perhaps the *norn* takes her name from the well rather than the other way round.

In Eilífr Guðrúnarson's *lausavísa* about Christ, allegedly c.1000 (Skj BI, p. 144), cited in *Skáldskaparmál* 52, the well is mentioned again:<sup>42</sup>

Setbergs — kveða sitja  
 suðr at Urðar brunni —  
 svá hefir ramr konungr remðan  
 Róms banda sik lǫndum.  
 (Snorri Sturluson, 1998, p. 76)

‡

His seat<sup>43</sup> is said to be  
 south at Urðr's well,  
 Rome's strong king has  
 strengthened his grip on the lands.<sup>44</sup>

This almost direct parallel between Christ and the *nornir* may relate to the legal notions that surround the *nornir*.<sup>45</sup> The parallel would then find some explanation in the fact that the Christian church in early medieval Scandinavia seems to have had a particular liking for the image of Christ in judgement. DuBois (1999, pp. 61–2) writes:

Christian theology of the period possessed its own particular views of Jesus as well: In prayer, legend, and iconography, the North European in general favored an image of Christ in Judgment, drawing on the imagery of the Gospel of Matthew [25: 31–46].

That this Christian legal notion was the one most often employed by early Christianity in Scandinavia would seem to indicate that it was considered a particularly suitable one, which goes well with the Old Norse preoccupation with law. When Hallfreðr and Eilífr compare Christ, by implication or even directly, to the *nornir*, this may point to the strong quasi-legal aspect

of these female supernatural creatures. The heathen beings were replaced by the image of Christ in judgement. Thus, the legal mode of thought was maintained, only in a changed semi-Christianised guise provided by the Gospel itself.

Eilífr's stanza crosses Christian and heathen Norse ideas, shutting out the *nornir* altogether and placing Christ at the well of Urðr instead (placing the well in Rome, even, an important Christian centre), while the idea of the well as a central place remains the same. Christ is himself linked to a source of water in the apocryphal Book of James 11: 1 (James, 1945 [1924], p. 43), which shows Mary standing by a well when the Annunciation takes place.

The well linked to the *nornir* is called Urðarbrunnr, but there may be reason to consider it the same well as the ones referred to as Mímisbrunnr (*Völuspá* 28; *Gylfaginning* 15 and 51) and Hvergelmir (*Gylfaginning* 15, 16, 39 and 52; *Grímnismál* 26). Both Mímisbrunnr and Hvergelmir deserve much more attention than can be devoted to them here, but I will discuss them briefly.

Mímisbrunnr is connected to the enigmatic character of Mímir whom Snorri claims in *Ynglingasaga* 4 to be of the *æsir* but who in the *þulur* seems to be of the *jötnar* (Snorri Sturluson, 1998, p. 110). His name has connotations of wisdom and memory — abilities commonly associated with *jötnar* and also *völur*.<sup>46</sup> The association of Mímir, or of Mímir's head,<sup>47</sup> with wisdom is evident in *Völuspá* 46 and *Gylfaginning* 51 where it is said that Óðinn consults *Míms hofuð*, 'Mím's head'; moreover, Mímir is strongly associated with the well and the tree.<sup>48</sup> The name Sökkmímir, apparently 'sunken Mímir' (*sokkr* means 'a state of being sunken', Frtz, s.v.), occurs as the name of a *jötunn* in *Grímnismál* 50 where he is involved in one of Óðinn's exploits, in *Ynglingatal* 2 where he inhabits a shining hall, and in the *þulur* as a *jötunn*, a sword-*heiti* and a *heiti* for the heavens (Snorri Sturluson, 1998, pp. 110, 119 and 133).

In comparison, the name Hvergelmir appears also to be closely related to the realm of the *jötnar* as names ending in *-gelmir* are otherwise names of *jötunn* characters (Simek, 1993, p. 167; Kure, 2010, p. 47). Hvergelmir is only known from *Snorra-Edda* where it is a spring in Niflheimr (*Gylfaginning* 4) and a spring under Yggdrasill (*Gylfaginning* 15 and 39), and from *Grímnismál* 26 where it is the source of all rivers in the world. Centrality is as clear a feature of Hvergelmir as it is of Mímisbrunnr and Urðarbrunnr.



Mímir represents some kind of otherworldly knowledge that is of immense value, certainly to Óðinn, and here Mímir overlaps significantly with the *vǫlva* of *Vǫluspá* and of *Baldrs draumar*. Through his close association with the well he displays some parallel features to the *nornir*, except he is male and is nowhere connected to fate. Hvergelmir, Mímisbrunnr and Urðarbrunnr overlap too much for them to be completely separated out as individual unrelated wells. In all likelihood, they represent expressions of the same idea: the otherworldly well of wisdom guarded by beings associated with the underground and with the *jǫtnar*.

### 3.2.2 Below the Surface

This well beneath the tree is of interest because it connects the *nornir* to a whole range of other female supernatural beings, such as the *dísir* who are linked to the Uppsala sacrifice and the sacred tree with a well or spring beneath it (*Ynglingasaga* 29).<sup>49</sup> But several other figures are also relevant.

*Vǫluspá* 33 names Frigg's dwelling place Fensalir, a name which literally means 'hall in the fens', and *Grímnismál*, in a parallel image, states that Óðinn and the goddess Sága drink in a place called Sökkvabekkr, which means 'sunken benches'. Sága is little known outwith *Grímnismál* 7 and this makes it difficult to understand exactly what she is.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, there is alliteration between both Frigg and Sága and the names of their dwelling places — Frigg in Fensalir and Sága in Sökkvabekkr (Grundy, 1996, p. 62)<sup>51</sup> — and they overlap significantly with each other; they both stand in some relationship to Óðinn and both relate to ideas about prophecy and fate. The etymological meaning of Sága is probably 'seeress' (AeW, s.v.), recalling Frigg's knowledge about fate in *Lokasenna* 29. Furthermore, Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, in *Haustlǫng* 9, supposedly c.900, preserved in *Skáldskaparmál* 22 (Snorri Sturluson, 1998, pp. 30–3), states that the goddess Iðunn lives in a place called Brunnakr, 'field of wells', a name indicating a watery place like Fensalir and Sökkvabekkr. Iðunn is also a figure in charge of life and death as she holds the apples said to keep the gods young (*Gylfaginning* 26; *Skáldskaparmál* G56). Thus, these three goddesses, like the *nornir*, relate to water sources found below ground.<sup>52</sup>

As noted above, the two versions of *Vǫluspá* refer to, respectively, a lake and a hall as the place of origin of the *nornir*, both situated beneath the tree. But there need not be any great discrepancy between the two

images because Fensalir provides a two-in-one solution: there is a hall in the water. This idea is clearly expressed in the Old English poem *Beowulf*,<sup>53</sup> lines 1492–517, where the hero Beowulf dives into the pool in pursuit of the wounded Grendel and finds a hall deep down. Lines 1492–6 read as follows:

Æfter þæm wordum Weder-Geata leod  
efste mid elne, — nalas andsware  
bidan wolde; brimwylm onfeng  
hilderince. Ða wæs hwil dæges,  
ær he þone grundwong ongytan mehte.  
(Klaeber, 2008, p. 51)

✚

After these words the Weather-Geat prince  
dived into the Mere — he did not care  
to wait for an answer — and the waves closed over  
the daring man. It was a day's space almost  
before he could glimpse ground at the bottom.  
(Alexander, 2001 [1973], p. 54)

The description continues in lines 1512–17:

Ða se eorl ongeat,  
þæt he [in] niðsele nathwylcum wæs,  
þær him nænig wæter wihte ne sceþede,  
ne him for hrofsele hrianan ne mehte  
færgripe flodes; fyrleoht geseah,  
blacne leoman beorhte scinan.  
(Klaeber, 2008, p. 52)

✚

Then the man found  
that he was in some enemy hall  
where there was no water to weigh upon him  
and the power of the flood could not pluck him away,  
sheltered by a roof: a shining light he saw,  
a bright fire shining clearly.  
(Alexander, 2001 [1973], p. 55)

The Old English poem portrays the woman whom Beowulf encounters down there in the 'enemy hall' in the water, Grendel's mother, as an

absolute monster;<sup>54</sup> yet, at the same time as being the terrifying enemy of the humans above the surface, she is also the mother of a son whose death causes her anger and grief. ‘She is not so much a “bad” mother, uncaring, unfeeling, unnurturing, as too good a one. Vengeful, son-obsessed, her maternity makes her an anti-social being, murderous and monstrous’ (Stafford, 1997, p. 80). The double-sided nature of the woman inhabiting the underwater hall is evident in *Beowulf*, even if we are not meant to have any sympathy for her.<sup>55</sup> In any case, it would not be surprising if the common association in Christian thought of heathen gods with devils produced a mutation whereby halls like those of Óðinn and Sága became the abodes of monsters cursed by God, such as Grendel and his mother.

Frigg, mother of Baldr, arguably carries some of this double-sidedness too. It is clear that she holds power over his death because she is the one who knows the secret of how he can be killed (*Gylfaginning* 49). As his mother, Frigg is the natural protector of Baldr’s life but simultaneously she is the one who can take it away, like Sigurðr jarl’s mother Eðna in *Orkneyinga saga*. Frigg does not cut a terrifying, gloomy figure in the sources; she is said to know about all fate (*Lokasenna* 29), but is generally rather a passive figure. She is, however, portrayed as actively exercising her powers in the prose introduction to *Grímnismál*, where she is seen as a genuinely powerful rival to Óðinn.<sup>56</sup> She is predominantly the good mother, her nurturing side made clear when she seeks to protect Baldr and later to retrieve him from the dead. There is no doubt that Grendel’s mother, too, loves her son, but her behaviour turns her into a grotesque, monstrous mother, the very opposite of the properly behaved Frigg.<sup>57</sup> Yet it is possible to see both mothers as linked to the giving as well as to the taking of life — the features that are so characteristic of the *normir* and *dísir*.

### 3.2.3 Below the Ground

Apart from the characters inhabiting wells, fens, pools and bogs, a number of other female supernatural characters merit at least a mention in relation to what has so far been said about the *normir*.

In *Baldrs draumar*, Óðinn travels to the underworld in order to consult a long-dead *völva* about the fate of his son Baldr. It is noteworthy that the *völva* encountered in this poem is not simply dead and buried in a normal way: she is in some underworld realm of the dead and even there, among

the dead, she is buried. As such, she is doubly dead, or at least buried twice over.<sup>58</sup> This *vǫlva* possesses knowledge about the future that Óðinn himself does not have, and in stanza 4 he employs a magical spell in order to bring her back from her grave and to compel her to speak to him.<sup>59</sup>

Þá reið Óðinn  
fyr austan dyrr,  
þar er hann vissi  
vǫlo leiði;  
nam hann vittugri  
valgaldr qveða,  
unz nauðig reis,  
nás orð um qvað:

✚

Then Óðinn rode  
east of the door  
to where he knew  
a *vǫlva* was buried:  
he began reciting to the wise woman  
a magical corpse-spell  
until reluctantly she rose  
and spoke corpse-words:

Óðinn proceeds to question the dead woman, not only about the impending death of Baldr but also about events further into the future. She gives him answers, albeit with the greatest of reluctance, and the situation between Óðinn and the *vǫlva* has the character of a contest of power: she has the knowledge but he has the means to make her impart that knowledge to him, at least for a while. She answers the first three questions, finishing each of her stanzas with the phrase *nauðug sagðac, nú mun ec þegia* (reluctantly I spoke, now I will be silent). In stanza 12 Óðinn puts his fourth question, the meaning of which is characteristically cryptic and difficult to interpret, but which somehow reveals his identity to the *vǫlva* (he has hitherto concealed his identity, calling himself *Vegtamr*) and, with this, he loses his power over her.

The reluctance of the revived *vǫlva* to share her knowledge is by no means unique to her but seems reflected in the words of the *vǫlva* who speaks *Vǫluspá*.<sup>60</sup> In the middle section of the poem she finishes several of her stanzas with the phrase *vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?* (do you know yet,

or what?’). She is not as outspokenly hostile as is the *vǫlva* from *Baldrs draumar* and the situation surrounding her speech also appears to be of a different nature. In *Vǫluspá*, the *vǫlva* is closely associated with the *jǫtnar*, a race which the gods are generally at odds with and of which particularly the females can be very hostile,<sup>61</sup> so, although she appears to speak willingly, she may somehow have been compelled or paid to do so.

The very last phrase of *Vǫluspá*, *nú mun hon sǫcqvaz* (now she will sink),<sup>62</sup> could mean that she, too, has been made to rise from the dead to part with her knowledge and that she returns to a place below ground at the end of her prophecy. The phrase closely matches the reference to the tree *fyr mold neðan* (below ground) in stanza 2, while the fact that she remembers nine worlds recalls Hel who is said to rule over nine worlds and *Vafþrúðnismál* 43 where Vafþrúðnir says that he has been to nine worlds below Hel, into which human beings die out of Hel. The relationship between the *Vǫluspá*-*vǫlva* and the well itself may be marginal, but her chthonic underground aspect does seem clear. Also clear is the familiar wrestling over and reluctance to part with otherworldly knowledge, as Frigg, in *Lokasenna* 29, keeps silent about fate. The knowledge these women have seems to be of a dangerous and powerful kind, not easily obtained nor parted with.

Of relevance is also the poem *Hyndluljóð*, found in *Flateyjarbók* but not in *Konungsbók*.<sup>63</sup> Here, Freyia consults Hyndla, a *jǫtunn*-woman or troll-woman, in order to obtain knowledge about the ancestry of her lover, Óttar. In stanza 1, Freyia addresses her thus:

Vaki, mær meyia!  
vaki, mín vina,  
Hyndla systir,  
er í helli býr!  
nú er rǫcr rǫcra:  
ríða vit scolom  
til Valhallar,  
oc til vés heilags.  
‡  
Wake up, girl of girls!  
wake up, my friend,  
Hyndla sister,  
who lives in a cave!

now is the darkest of darkness:  
we two shall ride  
to Valhøll,  
and to the sanctuary of the gods.

The poem is interesting for a number of reasons. It involves consulting an otherworldly woman in order to make her part with her knowledge, she has to be awoken, her dwelling is a cave and the scene takes place in the dark. Hyndla's speech is reminiscent of a prophecy and the poem contains what is known as *Vøluspa hin skamma*, 'The Shorter *Vøluspa*' (stanzas 29–44). It is clear that Hyndla is the one who possesses not only the knowledge but also the precious drink, called *minnisöl*, 'memory-ale' (stanza 45), which Hyndla gives to Óttar at the end.<sup>64</sup> Hyndla seems in many ways related to the *vødur*.

*Hyndluljóð* 38 is interesting also for its description of Heimdallr as the son of nine *jötunn*-mothers:

Sá var aukinn  
iarðar megni,  
svalkøldom sæ  
oc sonardreyra<sup>65</sup>  
✚  
He was strengthened  
with the power of the earth,  
with the cold sea  
and with sacrificial blood

These lines are remarkably similar to *Guðrúnarkviða II* 21, lines 5–8:

þat var um aukit  
urðar magni,  
svalkøldom sæ  
oc sonardreyra  
✚  
it was strengthened  
with fateful power,  
with the cold sea  
and with sacrificial blood

In *Guðrúnarkviða*, this describes a drink given to Guðrún to make her forget the past. Steinsland (1991, pp. 282–3) suggests that the close similarities

between *Hyndluljóð* 38 and *Guðrúnarkviða II* 21 relate to ideas about a ritual drink of some sort. This would allow the two stanzas to be seen simply as variations of the same idea instead of one being regarded as a corrupt form of the other. The relationship between *iarðar megni* and *urðar magni* may be more than just accidental linguistic similarity as both can be understood as ways of referring to supernatural forces below the ground (Reichborn-Kjennerud, 1933, p. 61; Steinsland, 1991, pp. 282–3). The problem with this is that the stanza in *Hyndluljóð* refers to a god, but the one in *Guðrúnarkviða* refers to a drink.

The last female figure to be included here is Gunnlōð.<sup>66</sup> *Skáldskaparmál* G57–G58 tells the story of how Óðinn obtained the mead of poetry, which the *jötunn* Suttungr kept deep inside the mountain of Hnitbjörg, with his daughter Gunnlōð to guard it. When Suttungr refuses Óðinn's request for a drink of the mead, Óðinn bores a hole through the mountain, changes himself into a snake and enters the mountain to get to the precious liquid. The story continues:

Fór Bolverkr [Óðinn] þar til sem Gunnlōð var ok lá hjá henni þrjár nætr, ok þá lofaði hon honum at drekka af miðinum þrjá drykki. Í inum fyrsta drykk drakk hann allt or Óðreri, en í qðrum or Boðn, í inum þriðja or Són, ok hafði hann þá allan mjōðinn. (Snorri Sturluson, 1998, p. 4)

†

Bolverk [Óðinn] went to where Gunnlod was and lay with her for three nights and then she let him drink three draughts of the mead. In the first draught he drank everything out of Odrerir, and in the second out of Bodn, in the third out of Son, and then he had all the mead. (Snorri Sturluson, 1987, p. 63)

The story is also referred to in *Hávamál* 104–10, though in a version rather different from Snorri's. Scholarly tradition has often seen the two renditions as different variants of the one story, taking *Skáldskaparmál* as the basis on which to interpret the more fragmentary *Hávamál* (Meletinskij, 1973, pp. 57–78; Simek, 1993, pp. 124–5, 208–9; Edwards and Pálsson, 1998, pp. 29–30). However, Svava Jakobsdóttir has shown that the two versions of the story about Gunnlōð should not be regarded as one and the same:

It is clear that the *Hávamál* stanzas in question must be examined, once and for all, without the help of Snorri Sturluson.

It seems to me that they will remain obscure if we turn to Snorri uncritically for explanation and read into the poem on the basis of the younger work. It may well be that many points of *Hávamál* seem obscure only because attempts are made to force them into fixed conceptions imported from other times and places — or perhaps because of simple misunderstandings. (Svava Jakobsdóttir, 2002, p. 31)

Svava goes on to discuss the *Hávamál* stanzas independently of *Skáldskaparmál*, finding that the story they tell bears much closer resemblance to royal consecration ceremonies associated with the *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage), described in Old Irish tradition as *banais rígh*e or *feis temrach*, than it does to Snorri's account.<sup>67</sup> Irish tradition tells of:

a woman (the goddess) who grants the king-figure (or hero) mead and goes to bed with him ... The goddess (or her personification) is called 'Sovereignty,' and she grants the king authority to reign with a 'sacred marriage.' (Svava Jakobsdóttir, 2002, p. 34)<sup>68</sup>

The poet or compiler of *Hávamál* is unlikely to have any overt intention of portraying a royal consecration ceremony, but the motif does seem to be latently present. Furthermore, Svava points out that, whereas Snorri tells the story of a theft, *Hávamál* places much stronger emphasis on betrayal; *Skáldskaparmál* has Óðinn use trickery to worm his way into the mountain where he is clearly not supposed to be, whereas in *Hávamál* he is openly allowed in, even expected and welcomed, at least by Gunnlōð, if not by Suttungr. Moreover, *Hávamál* only introduces the *heiti* Bqlverkr, 'Evildoer', after the betrayal has taken place, while *Skáldskaparmál* uses it throughout the story. The betrayal motif is clear, for example in *Hávamál* 105 where Gunnlōð is first introduced:

Gunnlōð mér um gaf  
gullnom stóli á  
drycc ins dýra miaðar;  
ill iðgiöld  
lét ec hana eptir hafa  
síns ins heila hugar,  
síns ins svára sefa.

‡



Gunnlǫð gave me  
from her golden seat  
a drink of the precious mead,  
a poor return  
I let her have after that,  
for her sincerity,  
for her heavy mind.

The argument made by Svava Jakobsdóttir has considerable validity; she manages to show that the Gunnlǫð story told in *Hávamál* makes good sense in itself, and this story is relevant to the present discussion.

The mead, of poetry or of sovereignty, is not an exact equivalent to Urðarbrunnr, but there is a level of correspondence nonetheless. The mead seems to relate especially clearly to Mímisbrunnr with its connotations of wisdom and knowledge and as the object of Óðinn's quest in *Völuspá* 46, where he seeks out Mímisbrunnr to get counsel from Mímir. Thus, Óðinn seeks out three wells with similar intentions: Mímisbrunnr in *Völuspá* 46 and *Gylfaginning* 51; Urðarbrunnr in *Hávamál* 111; and Gunnlǫð's mead in *Hávamál* 104–10. All three sources of liquid are connected to wisdom and to some kind of power, be it in the form of knowledge or sovereignty; they are underground and at least two of them are guarded by strongly chthonic figures, Mímir and the *normir*, and two of them by female figures, Gunnlǫð and the *normir*. All of the guardians have close affiliations to the *jötnar*.

The story about Gunnlǫð does not portray a hall in a well in the way Fensalir, Sökkvabekkr and Grendel's mother's lair do — but it gives the reverse image: there is a source of special liquid in the underground dwelling of this supernatural woman; there is a well in the hall. Interestingly, Eyvindr skáldaspillir, in *Háleygjatal* 2, apparently c.985, alludes to the story using the *heiti* Sökkdalr to refer to Hnitbjörg, the mountain inside which Gunnlǫð resides (*Skáldskaparmál* 2). Hnitbjörg means 'clashing rocks' (LP, s.v.; Frtz, s.v.), a name corresponding to the Symplegades of classical tradition,<sup>69</sup> the dangerous entrance to the otherworld through which only the hero can enter; Sökkdalr translates as 'sunken glen' or 'deep valley' (LP, s.v.), a name strongly recalling Fensalir, Brunnakr and especially Sökkvabekkr, all of them dwellings of goddesses who relate to fate. Óðinn comes to Hnitbjörg/Sökkdalr in search of the mead, while in *Grímnismál* 7 he is said to drink with Sága from golden cups in Sökkvabekkr; there is a close parallel in the images given by *Grímnismál* and

*Hávamál* in this respect, and it therefore seems relevant to include Gunnlǫð in the discussion of the *normir* and the other women in the well.

Immediately after the story about the mead, *Hávamál* introduces the well of fate in stanza 111:

Mál er at þýlia  
þular stóli á,  
Urðar brunni at;  
sá ec oc þagðac,  
sá ec oc hugðac,  
hlýdda ec á manna mál;  
of rúnar heyrða ec dæma,  
né um ráðom þogðo,  
Háva hǫllo at,  
Háva hǫllo í,  
heyrða ec segja svá:

✚

There are words to be declared  
from the wise one's seat,  
at the well of Urðr;  
I saw and I was silent,  
I saw and I thought,  
I listened to the speech of men,  
of runes I heard talk  
nor were they quiet about good counsel,  
at the High One's hall,  
in the High One's hall,  
I heard them say thus:

This is followed by the so-called *Loddfáfnismál* section of the poem.

Stanza 105 shows Gunnlǫð, seated on a golden seat, guarding the mead deep inside the mountain; stanza 111 describes another seat, by Urðarbrunnr but also, seemingly, in some hall where Óðinn hears 'talk about runes' and 'good counsel'. The mention of Urðarbrunnr follows straight after the Gunnlǫð story; a woman guarding three vats of mead is described first, then the action shifts to the well of fate, guarded by the *normir* who may have been conceived of as a group of three. From these places Óðinn obtains valuable things, sovereignty followed by runic knowledge in *Hávamál*, poetry

in *Skáldskaparmál*, where the latter two may be regarded as corresponding to each other as poetry and wisdom were considered close relatives in the Old Norse mindset.<sup>70</sup>

Another ‘seat’ possibly akin to the two discussed above is mentioned in the strongly Christian poem *Sólarljóð* 51:<sup>71</sup>

Á norna stóli  
 satk níu daga,  
 þaðan vask á hest hafinn,  
 gýgjar sólir  
 skinu grimmliga  
 ór skýdrúpnis skýum  
 (Skj BI, p. 643–AI, p. 635)

‡

On the seat of the nornir  
 I sat for nine days,  
 whence I was lifted up onto a horse,  
 the suns of the troll-wives  
 were shining grimly  
 out from the clouds in the sky

There have been different interpretations of this *norna stóll*, ‘seat of the *nornir*’, whether it is a deathbed from which the soul of the dead is eventually lifted or an image of Purgatory. It has also been compared to Óðinn’s self-sacrifice on the tree in *Hávamál* 138–41 (Fidjestøl, 1979, pp. 48–9; Njörður P. Njarðvík, 1991, pp. 80–1). It must be kept in mind, however, that *Sólarljóð* is hardly intended to describe a non-Christian ritual, though it may draw on folk traditions. Whether *Sólarljóð* 51 describes a deathbed or Purgatory, the varying interpretations agree on the fact that this is an intermediate somewhere and a decidedly unpleasant one. The *norna stóll* reflects the heathen association of the *nornir* with transitions and the chthonic realm, and in this Christian context the *nornir* are probably regarded as evil beings.

### 3.3 The *Dyngja*

Having considered the similarities between the places where the *nornir* and other related female beings are said to come from, the question of why figures representing fate are almost always feminine will be addressed.<sup>72</sup> The idea presented below is in some ways speculative and brings the discussion into

a slightly more conjectural mode, but it nonetheless has strong relevance to the topic at hand.

To begin with, it can be pointed out that the above-discussed places below ground and especially in water seem to be places that carry strong feminine connotations and where masculinity is somehow marginal.

The Norwegian *skáld Þórbjörn hornklofi*, in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* 15 (the poem is known as *Haraldskvæði*), supposedly c.900, says:

Úti vil jól drekka,  
ef skall einn ráða,  
fylkir enn framlyndi  
ok Freys leik heyja,  
ungr leiddisk eldvelli  
ok inni at sitja,  
varma dyngju  
eða vottu duns fulla.  
(ÍF, Vol. 26, p. 112)

‡

Outside he will drink Yule,  
if he has it his own way,  
the foremost prince  
and play Freyr's game;  
as a child he detested the fireside  
and sitting indoors,  
the warm dyngja  
and mittens filled with down.

The place described in the penultimate line, the *dyngja* (pl. *dyngjur*),<sup>73</sup> is, as can be gauged from Þórbjörn's stanza, regarded as a space not suitable for men. The *dyngja* is a certain building or room where women would do women's work, particularly textile work (Brednich, 1964; Zimmermann, 1982, p. 110; Østergård, 2004, pp. 58–9). Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1997, p. 150) says about this: *Spunakonur í Asíu og á meginlandi Evrópu mynduðu víða með sér eins konar leynifélög sem karlmönnum var stranglega bannaður aðgangur að* (Female spinners in many parts of Asia and mainland Europe formed among themselves some sort of secret societies from which men were strictly excluded). This seems akin to what Wolfram (1933) refers to in his descriptions of a ritual surrounding the flax harvest in the border

area between Styria and Carinthia in Austria. There, tending the drying flax in a special outbuilding was a job for women only:

Besonders die Brechlbadstube, wo der Flachs gedörret wird, darf von niemand als dem Hårpåtsch oder Hårpåtschin<sup>74</sup> betreten werden; so heißt das Weib, welches den Brechlerinnen aus der stark rauchenden und rußigen Dörrstube den Flachs zuträgt. Sie ist von ihrem Geschätze Schwarz an den Händen und im Gesicht. Erspäht sie zufällig ein Knechtlein, so führt sie es unter schallendem Gelächter gewaltsam zum Tanze, daß er sich auf und auf beruht. (Wolfram, 1933, p. 138)

‡

Especially the drying house where the flax is dried may not be accessed by anyone except the *Hårpåtsch* or *Hårpåtschin*; that is the name of the woman, who brings the flax to the flax breakers, coming from the sooty and smoky drying room. Her hands and face are black from her work. If she spies a male farm servant, she forces him, accompanied by loud laughter, to dance so that he becomes sooty all over.<sup>75</sup>

That the women involved in this hot, smoky work would look frightening when they came out of the drying room and might use this to their advantage is incidental; what is interesting is the idea that men were forbidden to enter the area at all: *Die eigentlichen Vorrechte der Brechlerinnen bestehen darin, daß jedes männliche Wesen, das mit oder ohne Absicht in ihre Nähe gerät, dafür büßen muß* (The actual privilege of the woman who does the breaking is that every male being that, with or without intent, comes near her will have to pay for it; Wolfram, 1933, p. 139).<sup>76</sup> The fact that the ritualistic aspects of flax harvesting continued in the area long after flax had lost most of its practical value and meaning to the communities would seem to hint at some strong symbolic aspects attached to it (Wolfram, 1933, p. 137).

In certain ways, the flax drying room is comparable to the Norse *dyngja* as a specifically female space. It represents a separate area that only women would normally enter or in which it would at least be unlikely for a man to spend time. It is a workshop space, akin to a smithy,<sup>77</sup> and would not be frequented unless for specific reasons or because it is one's own. All the same, it is an everyday room, hardly to be regarded as a designated ritual space.

In archaeological excavations of Old Norse settlements, *dyngjur* are recognisable as rooms containing many textile-related tools and implements, particularly loom weights, which were used to keep the warp taut on an upright loom. This space was often physically separate from other parts of the house. Østergård writes:

From a review of the find-spots of loom weights in excavations from, among other places, the Old Town in Oslo and from Scania, it is evident that they [*dyngjur*] are often found on the northern side of the room in the dwelling or towards the northeast in pit-houses and it has been possible to see that a door or entrance was placed on the opposite side. The placing of the loom in relation to the door has therefore been interpreted as the result of a wish to receive any light that came in. On the Greenland farms the *dyngja* was placed in the northern or northeastern part of the farms but may not have had anything to do with light, since no outside doors were found in these rooms. (Østergård, 2004, p. 59)

And further, concerning one of the Norse farms in Greenland:

The weaving room at the Farm Beneath the Sand (64V2-III-555) [Western settlement] was sunken, and there was no door out to the open air. The low-lying placing may therefore not be the result of a wish for diagonally falling light. On the other hand, in the weaving room the largest fireplace registered in the farm complex was found, and this may have something to do with the light, since in a large fireplace there is room for a lot of fuel, which besides heat would also provide a good deal of light. (Østergård, 2004, p. 60)

This latter description fits the warm *dyngja* with the firelight mentioned by Þorbjörn. Østergård (2004, p. 69) goes on to suggest that looms may have been moved outside during the summer — why, after all, would people want to weave inside dark, half-underground places when there is plenty of light outside? Yet archaeological scholarship does not mention traces of weaving found at outside locations. Loom weights always seem to be found inside houses rather than outside and there are good reasons not to move an upright loom outside. One reason is that the Scandinavian summer, apart from being very light, can be very wet, and weaving in the rain would not

be desirable.<sup>78</sup> One cannot spin in the rain either, but a spindle is more easily shifted to a different location than a loom is. Another reason is that, once the loom is set up, it would be cumbersome to take it down again in order to move it and one can hardly imagine attempts at shifting a loom after it has been set up. In Scandinavia, weaving was probably an indoor activity and in shieling cultures, such as most of Norway, Iceland and parts of Sweden, but also in Denmark, it was traditionally an activity carried out predominantly during the winter (Højrup, 1978 [1966], p. 177). Otherwise, looms would presumably have left traces also at shieling sites, not just farm sites. Spinning, however, is a portable activity and has left archaeological traces at shielings as well as house sites. Spinning was not confined to indoor areas; weaving probably was.

In certain symbolic ways, the *dyngja* corresponds to Fensalir, to Sökkvabekkr, to the hall in or by Urðarbrunnr, to Sökkdalr — Gunnlǫð's dwelling deep inside the mountain — and to the hall of Grendel's mother deep down at the bottom of the pool. This space is charged with feminine powers of a kind that have to do with creation, with transformation, and one expects to find only women inside that space.

It is not the intention here to claim that the *dyngja* was a holy or sacred space but, as a specifically feminine space set aside for feminine types of work, it had the potential for taking on connotations of magic and of issues outside of the masculine realm. As spinning could at certain times and in special circumstances have some magical significance, so the *dyngja* may likewise have obtained similar connotations at times. Most of the time, spinning is just work needing to be done, the *dyngja* is just the place where it is done and there is nothing strange about that; both should on the whole be regarded as everyday matters. Yet spinning carried out with magical or at least unusual intent does occur (see 4.1.4); in such special situations it is possible that the space in which this activity is carried out can obtain similar status, even if only temporarily.<sup>79</sup> The *dyngja*, then, may be regarded, not in itself as a magical space, but as a space wherein certain magical or quasi-magical things could take place under certain circumstances. Simultaneously, it has a specifically feminine identity.

Connections between the earth, the underground and feminine deities are common; indeed, Old Norse mythology personifies the earth as female: Jǫrð, mother of Þórr. Furthermore:

Belief in the goddess is connected with the earth in the most literal terms. It is not unlikely that the religion of the ancient Scandinavians was associated with hills, or that religious ceremonies derived from belief in the earth and in re-birth took place in specially prepared hills or caves. Innumerable traditions associated with such places survive in the *fornaldarsögur* and in folklore. It is clearly not sensible to lay too much emphasis on these traditions, but there is a weight of evidence to suggest that such ceremonies continued into the saga age. Men entered into foster brotherhood with one another by carving up the earth and going under an arch of raised turf where they drew their own blood and mixed it together with the soil (*Gísla saga* ch. 6 [ÍF, Vol. 6, pp. 22–3]). This is obviously a re-birth ritual where belief in the earth as mother is implicit in the actual form of the ceremony. When men entered into foster brotherhood, the earth was not merely a symbol of re-birth; it was also the ceremony's frame, the shrine itself, the actual womb of a mother. (Svava Jakobsdóttir, 2002, p. 40)

This connects to the goddesses below the ground as well as to the *dyngja*. No direct line can be drawn between the *dyngja* and the notion of it as a symbolic womb in Old Norse literature, but the *dyngja* and the womb are akin to each other as secret, feminine spaces wherein things are generated (Mencej, forthcoming). One text passage seems quite plausibly understood in the light of this idea, which is potentially implied in the words of Eðna as she gives the infamous raven banner to her son, Sigurður jarl, in *Orkneyinga saga* 11:<sup>80</sup>

Ek mynda þik hafa lengi upp fætt í ulllaupi mínum, ef ek vissaði,  
at þú myndir einart lifa, ok ræðr auðna lífi, en eigi, hvar maðr er  
komin; betra er at deyja með sæmð en lifa með skömm. (ÍF, Vol.  
34, pp. 24–5)

✚

I would have nurtured you for a long time in my wool basket, if  
I knew that you would live forever, but it is fate which rules life,  
and not where a man happens to be; better to die with dignity than  
to live with shame.

This statement can be read in the light of the idea proposed here. Being inside the wool basket can be likened to being inside the *dyngja*,<sup>81</sup> and this



can be done in two ways: firstly, the *dyngja* is a protective but also confining environment, fit for women and children but not for grown men. A young boy may spend time in the *dyngja*, but when he grows up he must leave it.<sup>82</sup> Secondly, the wool basket contains wool that is as yet untreated; it is a mass of potential but is still without shape or order. In this way it is like the womb where human beings are put together; to remain there would be to remain unborn, not entering the world.

The argument is that there is a symbolic connection between producing textile work on the one hand and giving birth on the other hand (see also Mencej, forthcoming). What Eðna is saying, then, is that, for someone to live forever, time has to be suspended at the in-between stage when the person is still in the protective, formative sphere of the wool basket, womb or *dyngja* — which is impossible.<sup>83</sup> At the same time as Eðna says this to Sigurðr, she hands him the magical raven banner that causes his death. She, his mother who has given him life, now effectively gives him death, perhaps emulating the *normir* as givers and takers of life.

The suggested connection between Eðna's wool basket and the *dyngja* works on two levels: one is that of human social conventions, the other is a symbolic interpretation not explicitly present in the text. The first level works this way: were Sigurðr to remain in the wool basket, or in the *dyngja*, that concrete workshop space that is considered specifically female, he would not be a 'proper' man. This reading is straightforward. The second level works this way: whatever is brought into the *dyngja*, the womb, comes out transformed from a raw and unshaped mass into a human being the same way as untreated wool in the wool basket is transformed into ordered, useful threads. As Barber says about the Greek goddess Aphrodite: 'Why should the goddess of love and procreation be a spinner? ... Something new is coming into being where before there was at most an amorphous mass' (1994, p. 238).

The suggestion of a connection between what goes on in the womb and what goes on in the *dyngja* finds further support in other European traditions, also Christian ones.<sup>84</sup> In the apocryphal Book of James (also known as the *Protevangelium*) there is a description of the Annunciation, which shows Mary spinning when the angel comes to her:

But Mary took the scarlet and began to spin it.

XI 1 And she took the pitcher and went forth to fill it with

water: and lo a voice said: Hail, thou art highly favoured; the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And she looked about her upon the right hand and upon the left, to see whence this voice should be: and being filled with trembling she went to her house and set down the pitcher, and took the purple and sat down upon her seat and drew out the thread.

**2** And behold an angel of the Lord stood before her saying: Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all things, and thou shalt conceive of his word. And she, when she heard it, questioned in herself, saying: Shall I verily conceive of the living God, and bring forth after the manner of all women? And the angel of the Lord said: Not so, Mary, for a power of the Lord shall overshadow thee: wherefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of the Highest. And thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins. And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord is before him: be it unto me according to your word. (James, 1945 [1924], p. 43)

Two details are of interest here: that Mary is spinning when she conceives, and that she first hears the voice when she goes to fetch water from the well.

The tradition of the spinning Virgin Mary is strongly supported by Eastern European iconography of the Annunciation. Two such icons dating from the eleventh century exist in St Sofia Cathedral in Kiev, another dating from 1103 can be found in St George's Cathedral in Novgorod, while a twelfth-century fresco fragment in the Church of Sopre in Spain reveals that the same tradition existed in Western Europe. It was discontinued there in later times, but was maintained in Eastern Europe (Badalanova, 2004 [2006]). All of these icons portray Mary holding a spindle and some of them even show the baby Jesus inside her just where the thread crosses her abdomen (see also Mencej, forthcoming).

The link between spinning and giving birth is also expressed in other ways:

Many Slavonic riddles play with this archetypal metaphor, showing the distaff<sup>85</sup> as an allegorical image of the mother who is spinning the thread of life, while the yarn on the spindle is

considered a child growing in her womb: ‘The mother shrinks, the child grows. What is it?’ ... In a number of similar riddles the distaff is also allegorically described as a mother who is spinning her offspring’s life into form out of her own body. (Badalanova, 2004 [2006], p. 231)<sup>86</sup>

Inside the *dyngja*, on both levels, ‘nothing’ is made into ‘something’. In the actual *dyngja*, masses of untreated wool and flax are transformed into threads and the threads are put together in weaving, embroidery and other types of textile work. This is a human space, an area of feminine creativity and work where shape is given to unformed masses of potential. In the symbolic *dyngja*, the womb, the powers of fate are at work, those feminine powers represented by the *nornir* that structure and order and lay down laws for the little human inside its mother, even before it is born.<sup>87</sup>

The force at work in the symbolic *dyngja* is neither good nor bad and what it brings forth may be good or evil. The power is not inherently positive or negative, it is neither good nor bad, or — which is the same thing — it is both benign and evil at the same time. It is a double-sided ordering principle that structures and puts together both the physical form of a human and the life it is going to live. This comes very close to the portrayal of the *nornir* in *Völuspá* 20, where they are said to ‘lay down laws’ and ‘choose life for the children of men’.

### 3.4 Summary: Fate Comes from the Well

In this chapter, answers have been sought to two major questions: what can be made of the stereotypical idea that there are three *nornir*, as *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda* portray them? And why is fate so strongly associated with the feminine?

As regards the three names, Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld, it was found that the evidence for this constellation is not only relatively late but also confined to only two sources (Snorri probably copying from *Völuspá*). The notion of a triple division of the collective group of *nornir* is supported by *Fáfnismál* 13, which, in turn, may be drawing on traditions similar to those underlying the *First Merseburg Charm*. The strongest evidence for a trinity of *nornir* is the Roman-inspired votive altars depicting three ‘mothers’, but the ways in which they relate to the Old Norse *nornir* cannot be determined exactly.

On the whole, it seems a futile quest to argue for or against any specific enumeration of the *nornir*; were there any such ideas in heathen tradition, these are likely to have been subject to change throughout time and space anyway and the question in itself does not really bring us any closer to an understanding of what the *nornir* are.

Of greater interest are the names given to the three *nornir*. The temporal interpretation of the names as ‘Past’, ‘Present’ and ‘Future’ seems to be evident in, even built into, the idea of there being three. On the other hand, Verðandi was found to be a late addition, serving primarily as a grammatical link between the other two names. Urðr and Skuld, however, are certainly old, not as representatives of specific chronological periods but rather of aspects of death and fate. Both portray an image of fate, Urðr related specifically to the well, Skuld specifically to battle. Whereas the name Urðr is closely connected to the *nornir*, Skuld appears to span the grey area dividing *nornir* from (and linking them to) *valkyrjur*.

It is hard to reach any firm conclusions regarding a group of three *nornir*; the evidence is inconclusive and probably reflects a situation similar to that of the Saami *akkas*: different regions knew different traditions concerning their enumeration (Kulonen *et al.*, 2005, p. 281).

The arguments presented in this chapter establish a connection between specific supernatural female figures (*nornir*, *völur*, Frigg, Sága, Grendel’s mother and Gunnlǫð) on the grounds that they share a certain set of features. They are all associated with the underground and many of them with wet or humid places, and this dark abode is aligned with the specific feminine workspace of the *dyngja*. *Dyngjur* are by no means the only type of half-underground pit houses revealed by archaeology, yet it is not only their physical layout but also their strongly gendered associations that make them relevant to a discussion of the many female guises of fate. The emphasis here is placed on the symbolic value of the type of work which goes on inside the *dyngja*, namely weaving, combined with the association of textile work with magic, with birth and with women in general. On this symbolic level, the *dyngja* compares to the womb as the ‘workshop of the creators of fate’.

Little is said about *dyngjur* in Old Norse literature and even less about the practicalities of childbirth. There may be a dearth of hard evidence, but this in itself does not invalidate the interpretation. We know that fate is

thought of predominantly in terms of feminine beings like the *nornir*; we know that the *nornir* are particularly concerned with birth and death — with the womb and the tomb. Furthermore, the fate–textile–*dyngja* complex is significantly supported by evidence from other traditions from Europe and further afield (see note 87). It is the very fact that the *dyngja* also has strong female connotations that makes it such a good analogy for the womb: both are spaces wherein female creativity is exercised, one on human terms, the other on supernatural terms. The situation would seem to lend itself easily to the blending together of these two levels.

### Notes to Chapter 3

- 1 This recalls *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* 28 where sweat from the manes of *valkyrjur*'s horses falls as dew in valleys and as hail in forests on higher ground, and also *Vafþrúðnismál* 14 where drops (presumably of foam) from the bit of the mythical horse *Hrímfaxi* fall as dew in the valleys. The name *Yggdrasill* is also indicative of a horse (Simek, 1993, p. 375; Stefánsson, 2005, p. 270), *drasill* being a poetic term for 'horse' (Frtz, s.v.; LP, s.v.).
- 2 *Hauksbók* has the preposition *á*, which normally means 'on'. However, it is hard to make sense of the image this way and most editors read it as meaning 'under', in accordance with *Konungsbók*.
- 3 The phrase is understood by some as a dative singular (Holtmark, 1951, p. 82), by others as an accusative plural (Hermann Pálsson, 1996, p. 71; Larrington, 1996, p. 6). I follow the latter convention and, as an accusative, *skíði* may be either singular or plural. I am grateful to Sverrir Tómasson for this information.
- 4 The term *brunnr* translates as 'a source of water, spring or well' (Frtz, s.v.; LP, s.v.); a sharp distinction between these meanings is not important to the argument presented here.
- 5 Kragerud (1981) gives an interpretation of the *nornir* based almost entirely on *Fáfnismál*.
- 6 In *Egils saga* 56 (ÍF, Vol. 2, p. 149).
- 7 FSN, Vol. 1, pp. 1–105.
- 8 Translation kindly provided by Jürgen Einhoff.
- 9 Larrington (1992, p. 155), Simek (1993, pp. 342 and 357), Lindow (2001, p. 245), Stefánsson (2005, p. 169), Steinsland (2005, pp. 249–50).
- 10 Ström (1985 [1961], p. 203) and Stefánsson (2005, pp. 169–70) suggest that time was seen as the force of fate and that this is the origin of the *Urðr*–Past interpretation. I find the fate–time equation unconvincing.
- 11 An interesting aspect of the word is that, in the genitive singular form *urðar*, it becomes indistinguishable from the genitive singular of *urð* (f.), meaning 'a pile of stones'. Kure (2010, p. 230) suggests that the two terms overlap in meaning because *urð* can be used to describe the underworld, as in 'below the stones' or 'below ground'. He argues further that it cannot be determined whether the name *Urðarbrunnr* is supposed to be understood as the 'spring of fate' or 'underworld spring'. Furthermore, some skaldic kennings appear to refer to *Hel* as 'goddess of the stone-heap' where the stone-heap indicates a cairn or burial mound (Abram, 2006, p. 17).
- 12 I am grateful to John McKinnell for suggesting this. John Lindow, however, holds the opinion that 'The tangible value of a debt is wholly in the future' (personal

- communication, 3 August 2007).
- 13 There is no indication in the poem itself that Skuld in *Völuspá* 30 is at all different from Skuld in *Völuspá* 20.
- 14 Death, however, could equally well be regarded as belonging to the past, as those who have died are neither in the chronological present nor in the future.
- 15 AM 448 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1686 (copy of the lost *Vatnshyrna*).
- 16 Wyrð in the context of three *nornir* recalls the English phrase ‘the weird sisters’ referring to ‘the three Fates’, usually the classical ones. This phrase is often used colloquially about the three witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, but in fact editions of *Macbeth* use the adjective ‘weyward’, not ‘weird’ (I.iii; III.i; IV.i). However, the account of the Macbeth story given by Andrew of Wyntoun in his *Orygynale Cronikyl of Scotland*, c.1420, does use ‘werd’: ‘Him thocht, till he was sa sittand, He saw thre women by gangand, And þai thre women þan thocht he Thre werd sisteris like to be’ (Amours, 1906, p. 274). The quotation is from the Wemyss text, chapter 118, lines 1899–908, but the Cottonian text, chapter 18, line 1862, also uses ‘werd’, although it differs a little from the Wemyss text in orthography. These ‘werd sisteris’ predict the future of Makbeth (as Wyntoun has the name).
- 17 How such different ideas can be accepted side by side seemingly without raising any questions in scholarship remains baffling. What does the past have to do with spinning? How are these two ideas meant to relate to each other?
- 18 Again, this may be indicative of the problems that arise from attempting to correlate fate with time (Winterbourne, 2004, pp. 49–53).
- 19 Similarly, Hár, Jafnhár and Þriðji whom Gylfi consults in *Gylfaginning* are all thought of as manifestations of Óðinn — although there are three of them, they are essentially the same one figure.
- 20 This is where the three women in *Norna-Gests þáttur* differ importantly: one of them is decidedly unlike the others. This in itself does not mean that they cannot represent the same or similar underlying principles, but the inherent opposition between the first two and the third woman speaks against an interpretation of them as representatives of fate.
- 21 I am grateful to Patricia Boulhosa for this observation.
- 22 Christianity may have found good use for a figure like Skuld, presenting a notion of guilt and sin or emphasising the idea that sins committed in the past must be paid for in the future. Skuld in *Hrólfs saga kraka* may be interpreted in this way. Skuld represents the misdeed of Helgi, Hrólfr’s father, against the elf-woman, Skuld’s mother, and it is Skuld who causes Hrólfr’s eventual downfall. In a sense, she embodies a guilt or debt, which Hrólfr has to pay, though it was incurred by his father (Kalinke, 2003, p. 163).
- 23 *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* 28 mentions þrennar níundar meyar (three times nine maidens), who apparently are valkyrjur; *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* 136 (Holm perg 6 fol., c.1275), which is a translation from the Greek, mentions nine daughters of Þórr, who are referred to as *nornir*; Heimdallr is said to have nine mothers, all of whom are sisters (*Hyndluljóð* 34–6; *Gylfaginning* 27), and Ægir has nine daughters who are the waves. Nine seems to recur as frequently as three when supernatural women are counted.
- 24 Some scholars regard these þursa meyar as *nornir* (Kragerud, 1981, p. 14; Larrington, 1996, p. 264; Kure, 2010, pp. 278–86).
- 25 *Völungasaga* 18 employs the term *sundrlausar* (unlike each other; Grimstad, 2000, p. 140).
- 26 A similar division, only four-part, occurs in *Hávamál* 143. Also *Barlaams ok Josaphats*

- saga* 136 refers to the *nornir* as ‘daughters’ of someone, only of Þórr rather than of Dvalin (see note 32).
- 27 Traditions about the enumeration of the Saami *akka* figures also vary: ‘The South Saami tradition has numerous aahka female divinities ... In the North Saami areas of Finland, only Máttaráhkká was known, not her daughter’ (Kulonen *et al.*, 2005, p. 281). Further on the *akkas*, see Friis (1871); Ränk (1955); Bäckman (1984).
  - 28 On the *moirai*, see Dietrich (1965); Hjortsø (1984).
  - 29 One of the *þættir* inserted into *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta* in *Flatexjarbók*, c.1387–95.
  - 30 The story of Meleagros’ birth is told in, among other places, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 8.451–5: the three Fates visit the newborn boy and allot him the same lifespan as a log burning on the fireplace. After this, they disappear, but the boy’s mother grabs the log and quenches the flame so that the log is preserved (see Hill, 1992).
  - 31 *Eiríks saga rauða* 4, ÍF, Vol. 4, p. 206; *Örvar-Odds saga* 2, FSN, Vol. 2, p. 205; *Ynglinga saga* 13–14, ÍF, Vol. 26, pp. 28–31; *Hrólfs saga kraka* 3, FSN, Vol. 2, pp. 9–11. Such terms occur in prose texts, whereas the term *völva* occurs also in poetic sources.
  - 32 Some references to *nornir* quite clearly draw on a witch-like portrayal of them, which stands in contrast to the references made in eddic and skaldic poetry. *Buslubæn* 8, from *Bósa saga* 5, AM 586 4º, c.1450–1500, mentions *töfrnornir* (*nornir* skilled in magic; FSN, Vol. 3, p. 294); in *Buslubæn*, Busla curses the king by calling on various types of threatening mythological beings to burn the king’s hall unless he spares Bósi, as she demands. *Hrólfs saga kraka* 48, AM 285 4º, c.1600–1700, refers to *álfar ok nornir ok ótöluligt illþyði* (*álfar* and *nornir* and countless other malicious beings; FSN, Vol. 1, p. 94). *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns* 21, AM 556 b 4º, c.1475–1500, features *nornir* playing the harp in the company of acrobatic dwarves and other weird and wonderful beings (Loth, 1963a, p. 51; I am grateful to Jonas Wellendorf for this reference). Such references have a distinct flavour of folk superstitions, reminiscent of the kinds of folkloristic references to the Old Norse gods that turn up in sagas (e.g. Óðinn and Þórr in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* 18 and 8, AM 564 a 4º, c.1390–1425). Similarly, *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* 136, Holm perg 6 fol., c.1275 (translated from the Greek), mentions Þórr’s nine daughters who are *nornir* (Rindal, 1981, p. 126), probably an approximation of a particular kind of female beings from classical tradition rather than a description of indigenous Norse beings.
  - 33 This reference to seats recalls the *norna stóll*, ‘norn-seat’, mentioned in *Sólarljóð* 51.
  - 34 I have previously explored the problems discussed here (see Bek-Pedersen, 2009). The present context is, however, a somewhat different one, although the gist of the argument remains the same.
  - 35 I owe a great debt to Anthony Winterbourne (2004) for his philosophical exploration of the concept of fate in Old Norse tradition.
  - 36 Aeschylus (525 bc–c.456 bc) is often recognised as the ‘father of tragedy’; *Agamemnon* is one of his tragedies.
  - 37 The lack of direct causality is also the reason why fate and magic are different concepts. Magic is the conscious attempt to influence the course of events by active intervention of some sort. Fate is the belief in inevitability. Magic, then, need not be a rational view of causality, but it nonetheless *is* causality of a kind. The two, however, need not exclude each other in any given belief system — belief systems are rarely consistent in all aspects. Whereas magic is the prerogative of witches, fate is the domain of *nornir* and figures like them; they may come together in the figure of the *völva*.

- 38 The same parallel has been drawn by Winterbourne (2004, pp. 105–6). I take a certain pride in knowing that he and I came up with this analogy independently of one another.
- 39 This has been expressed thus by the Norwegian–Danish author Aksel Sandemose: *Mands gerning er mands skæbne* (A man’s deed is a man’s fate; Sandemose, 1965, p. 53). Likewise the Danish author Karen Blixen: *Din sjæl er din skæbne* (Your soul is your fate; Fischer Hansen *et al.*, 1992, p. 387). Both sentiments go well with what is expressed in Plato’s ‘Myth of Er’ (*Republic* 11, Book 10, 617 d–e), where the souls of the dead are told: ‘Souls of a day, here you must begin another round of mortal life whose end is death. No Guardian Spirit will be allotted to you; you shall choose your own ... The fault lies not with God, but with the soul that makes the choice’ (Plato, 1987, p. 389).
- 40 By extension, the centrality of Urðarbrunnr would seem to connect the *nornir* to central places whereas they appear otherwise to be connected to liminality, borderlines and transition. I am grateful to Terry Gunnell for this observation.
- 41 A lake is, in fact, a rather different body of water from a well. This may be significant but will not be explored here.
- 42 I am grateful to Vésteinn Ólason for references to this passage.
- 43 The term *setberg* is widely used in Scandinavian areas to describe a particular landscape feature, namely a saddle-shaped mountain or ridge.
- 44 The stanza is difficult to translate. I rely mainly on Snorri Sturluson (1987, p. 126) but with some modifications. Further on Eilifr’s *lausavísa*, see von See (1981, pp. 394–5); Louis-Jensen (2000); Vésteinn Ólason (2000); Whaley (2003).
- 45 Vésteinn Ólason (2000, pp. 486–7) presents an interesting argument that it may relate to baptism.
- 46 There are different forms of the name: Mímir, Mím, Mími. ‘This suggests that more than one figure may have been conflated to make the Mímir we have in the mythology’ (Lindow, 2001, p. 231).
- 47 According to *Ynglingasaga* 4, the *vanir* behead Mímir and Óðinn magically preserves the head which speaks to him.
- 48 Some kennings for Yggdrasill involve names seemingly alluding to Mímir: Hoddmímis holt (*Vafþrúðnismál* 45) and Mímameiðr (*Fjolsvinnsmál* 20 and 24).
- 49 Adam of Bremen mentions this in Book 4 of his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg–Bremen* 26/skolion 138: ‘Near this temple stands a very large tree with wide-spreading branches, always green winter and summer. What kind it is nobody knows. There is also a spring at which the pagans are accustomed to make their sacrifices, and into it to plunge a live man. And if he is not found, the people’s wish will be granted’ (2002 [1959], p. 207). The textual transmission of Adam’s text is complex. This skolion appears to have been inserted in the earliest surviving manuscripts, but it has been suggested that it may reflect classical tradition more than it does Norse. Tim Bolton has commented that it is reminiscent of the description of Jupiter’s oak in Virgil’s *Georgics* from the first century bc (seminar at University of Aberdeen, 18 November 2010).
- 50 Sága in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 39 is apparently a place name.
- 51 Several similar alliterations exist in *Grímnismál*: Baldr in Breiðablikk, Njörðr in Nóatún, Freyia in Fólkvangr, Heimdallr in Himinbiörg; but there are likewise exceptions: Óðinn in Valhöll and Freyr in Álfheimr.
- 52 These goddesses in watery places also recall Tacitus’ description of the cult of Nerthus, in *Germania* 40 (Tacitus, 1970 [1948], pp. 134–5).
- 53 Preserved in the Nowell Codex (part of the Cotton Vitellius A.xv compilation). This MS is thought to have been written c.1000 (Klaeber, 2008, p. clxii); discussions on the age



of the language forms are ongoing.

- 54 Interestingly, *Beowulf* shows both a male and a female inhabitant of the pool, both of whom are known by the same one name with only the motherhood of the female to differentiate between them: Grendel and Grendel's mother. The son's name is used for her, too.
- 55 In line 1506, Grendel's mother is referred to as *brimwyl[ff]* (mere-wolf), an epithet that compares to the Norse Fenrisúlfr, whose name may indicate that he originally lived in the fens. *Brimwyl[ff]* also recalls the connection between troll-women and wolves (see Chapter 2, note 23).
- 56 The introduction to *Grímnismál* corresponds closely to the story told by Paulus Diaconus in his *History of the Langobards* from c.790 (Foulke, 1907, pp. 16–17).
- 57 Stafford (1997, p. 159) compares Grendel's mother to Wealhtheow who (in this comparison) can be likened to Frigg: 'Beowulf's Lady with the Mead Cup [Wealhtheow] and Grendel's mother delineate the acceptable and unacceptable faces of the queen-in-the-household. As a holder of treasure, a maker of gifts, counselling and speaking, she was the necessary cup-bearing lady. But when engaging in such activity for her own ends, she was monstrous, Grendel's mother fighting the hero alone in her hall beneath the mere.'
- 58 As a dead woman with supernatural powers she may recall the *konor dauðar*, 'dead women', in *Atlamál* 28.
- 59 The awakening of a dead woman in order to obtain otherworldly knowledge from her is rather like the opening of *Sigrdrífumál* and of *Völuspá* (Helga Kress, 1993, pp. 74–7).
- 60 *Völuspá* is commonly imagined so that Óðinn is questioning a *völva* (Hermann Pálsson, 1996, p. 76; Dronke, 1997, p. 52; Meulengracht Sørensen and Steinsland, 2001, p. 58), but some scholars (Gísli Sigurðsson, 2000–1; Kure, 2006) have argued that the opposite is the case: the *völva* is questioning Óðinn. Although both Gísli and Kure make valid points regarding stanza 29, there is a clear indication in stanza 1 that the *völva* is speaking at Óðinn's request. The exact relationship between the two figures in the poem is, however, problematic.
- 61 Many of Þórr's adversaries among the *jötnar* are females (Clunies Ross, 1994, p. 105; McKinnell, 2005, pp. 109–25).
- 62 The *völva* employs both first- and third-person singular forms in the poem, apparently using both to refer to herself.
- 63 For fuller discussions of this poem, see McKinnell (2002, 2005); Steinsland (1991).
- 64 This recalls the drink given to Sigurðr by Sigrdrífa in *Sigrdrífumál* 5 and by Brynhildr in *Völsungasaga* 21 (Grimstad, 2000, pp. 148–9).
- 65 *Sonardreyra* is a difficult word. Fritzner (s.v.) translates it as *Offerblod*, 'sacrificial blood', supposing (without stating why) that *sonargaltadreyri*, 'blood of a sacrificial boar', is a more original form of it.
- 66 Her name means 'war-invitation', which rather resembles the *valkyrja* names discussed in 2.1.3. Gunnlǫð, however, is said to be the daughter of a *jötunn*, a connection not normally made for *valkyrjur*.
- 67 Further on *banais ríge* and *feis temrach*, see 'kingship' in Óhógáin (1990, pp. 263–5) and MacKillop (2004 [1998], pp. 285–6).
- 68 This motif occurs in the Old Irish story about Niall Nógiallach, 'Niall of the nine hostages', told in *Echtra Mac nEchach Muigmedóin* (Stokes, 1903). The story is preserved in *Lebor Buidhe Lecáin*, 'The Yellow Book of Lecan', from c.1390.
- 69 Known from *Argonautica*, Book 2, 593–5 (Hunter, 1995, pp. 50–1 and 174).

- 70 This is by no means unique to Old Norse tradition; for a thorough discussion of the poetry-and-wisdom compound, see Bloomfield and Dunn (1989, pp. 106–19).
- 71 AM 166 b 8°, c.1600–1700, though the poem is allegedly from the thirteenth century (Njörður P. Njarðvík, 1991, p. 7).
- 72 Fate is feminine throughout most European cultures (Grimm, 2004 [1883], Vol. 1, pp. 411–14).
- 73 Dictionary definitions of the term *dyngja* indicate that it designates a space for women: ‘a lady’s bower’ (C/V, s.v.); *frauengemach unter der erde* (women’s quarters below ground; AeW, s.v.; compare Frtz, s.v., where *dyngja* is glossed as ‘a pile’ and ‘a semi-subterranean house or room serving as women’s quarters’).
- 74 *Hår* is an Austrian word for ‘flax’, German *Flachs* (Wolfram, 1933, p. 138).
- 75 Translation kindly provided by Peter Graff. Baines (1989, pp. 167–81) describes in detail the processes involved in flax husbandry: after harvesting, the flax stalks are placed in wet conditions to make the hard stems mould (retting), then they must be dried and afterwards comes the breaking which extracts the fibres from the stems. The broken flax straw then has to be removed from the fibres (scutching) and finally the fibres are separated from each other (hackling); then they are ready for spinning.
- 76 Translation kindly provided by Peter Graff.
- 77 There is a degree of correspondence between the processes of textile work and those of blacksmithing: both are ways of ‘creating something out of nothing’, as Terry Gunnell has put it; that is, giving shape to that which has no shape. Furthermore, the verbs *smíða* and *skapa* are often used with similar semantic content: ‘to create’ (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 2004). Roy (2009) discusses the similar kinds of symbolism, potential numinous aspects and secrecy attached to metalworking, woodcarving and textile production. Kure (2010, pp. 297–8) discusses the parallels between the divine creation of human beings in *Völuspá* 18 and actual birth, and he further links this to the description of the *normir* in *Völuspá* 20.
- 78 Regarding the issue of humidity, Baines (1989, p. 26) points out that flax fibres need to be wetted in order to be spun (see Chapter 4, note 15). Zimmermann (1982, p. 116), discussing pit houses as weaving houses, explains how weaving wool is unproblematic but for flax fibres a constantly humid atmosphere is desirable. This accords well with the idea of half-underground and possibly damp *dyngjur* heated by fires. Regarding the saga evidence, however, flax is unlikely to have been spun in Iceland as it was not grown there; it was grown in the southern part of Scandinavia.
- 79 Gunnell, discussing ritual space in pagan Norse houses, says: ‘The idea that these buildings were multifunctional implies that the meaning of their daily space was “transformed” in some ways at certain points in time’ (2004b [2001], p. 4).
- 80 *Flateyjarbók*, c.1387–95 and other MSS.
- 81 The image of the wool basket corresponds rather well to Þorbjörn’s cosy mittens.
- 82 In parts of Finland in modern times, the expression that someone has lived in ‘mamma’s wool basket’ means that the person has not yet come to know the hardship and cruelty of life (personal communication from Kaarina Koski, 20 September 2007). There is no direct link between this and the Old Norse material, but it is nonetheless a striking parallel.
- 83 In the *Odyssey* (2.93–110; 19.137–56; 24.129–48), Penelope is unweaving at night what she has woven during the day. There is a sort of death–rebirth theme attached to this story, which is told three times over, each time symbolising the death of a different person. At the very end, it comes to finally indicate the death of the suitors and rebirth

## The Women in the Well

of Odysseus as the weaving is finished just as Odysseus returns home (Fagles, 1996, pp. 472–3). The significance of Penelope’s weaving is discussed in detail by Lowenstam (2000).

84 I am grateful to Florentina Badalanova Geller for introducing me to this material.

85 The distaff is the tool that holds the unspun material while the spindle is the tool onto which the spun thread is wound. These are two separate tools.

86 Compare the Gotland–Swedish expression *spinnä pa* [*spinna på*], ‘spin onto (oneself)’, meaning ‘to become pregnant’ (Säve and Säve, 1941–5, s.v.). I am grateful to Eldar Heide for this reference.

87 See Bek-Pedersen (2008) for a discussion of two typological parallels from cultures in Guatemala and Mali.



## Fate and Threads

It is a common conception that the *nornir* spin and/or weave fate.<sup>1</sup> Numerous artistic representations of the *nornir* employ this image, which is also widely accepted in academic work,<sup>2</sup> and this chapter will focus on the connections between fate and various types of textile-related issues. In Old Norse tradition, fate does relate to textile, but not necessarily in the ways commonly imagined. The ‘threads’ in the chapter heading refer not only to strings, threads and yarns but also to the use of threads as part of textiles, such as embroidery, sewing and weaving. Thus, the ‘threads’ discussed below span the whole complex of making and using threads.<sup>3</sup>

### 4.1 Fate and Textile

The fact is that textile and textile work are in many ways good metaphors for how the concept of fate operates.<sup>4</sup> But the fact is also that there are no clear-cut and unequivocal representations of the *nornir* engaged in spinning or weaving to be found anywhere in Old Norse literature. This could be due to accidental loss of parts of the tradition — the source material that survives is not necessarily representative of the tradition as a whole. On the other hand, we can only work with what we actually have and, in spite of the general tendency to discuss them, we do not have any spinning and weaving *nornir* (Bek-Pedersen, 2007). There are, however, three texts that come close and, although none of them constitutes firm evidence, they all merit some discussion here.

#### 4.1.1 *Völundarkviða*

The eddic poem *Völundarkviða* contains the only direct reference to supernatural female figures who spin. It is a difficult poem to work with, because the editor, who included it in the *Edda* compilation and added prose passages between some of the stanzas, does not seem to have understood the poem all too well. It nonetheless merits some attention here. Stanza 1 reads:

Meyiar flugo sunnan  
myrcvið í gognom,  
alvitr unga,  
ørlog drýgia;  
þær á sævar strönd  
settuz at hvílaz,  
drósir suðrænar,  
dýrt lín spunno.

✚

Maidens flew from the south  
across Myrkviðr,<sup>5</sup>  
the strange young creatures,  
to fulfil fate.  
They sat on the lake shore  
to rest,  
southern ladies,  
spun precious linen.

The first point to make is that the term *nornir* is nowhere mentioned, not in this stanza, not in the entire poem, not in the prose passages that accompany it. The prose introduction labels the women *valkyrjur*, but the poem itself simply calls them *meyiar*, ‘maidens’, as *Völuspá* 20 does with the *nornir*. In almost every other respect, however, these ‘maidens’ are unlike *nornir*. In scholarship, the *Völundarkviða*-women are often referred to as ‘swan-maidens’, a term which occurs nowhere in Old Norse tradition. Nonetheless, as the poem clearly draws on narrative material that was by no means specific to Norse tradition, but had close parallels — if not origins — in Old English and Old German traditions, it should not be expected that its figures fit neatly into Norse categories of supernatural beings. The fact that the editor refers to the women as *valkyrjur* may therefore not have much to do with *valkyrjur* as these are portrayed elsewhere in Norse tradition (Dronke, 1997, p. 301–2; Ruggerini, 2006, pp. 215–16).

The names of these three women are of interest. The poem applies two sets of names: Hervör, Hlaðguðr and Qlrún on the one side, and the appellatives *alvitr* and *svanhvít* on the other.<sup>6</sup> Hervör and Hlaðguðr both fit into the group of battle-related names of *valkyrjur*. Hervör is compounded from the noun *herr*, ‘army’, and Vör, listed as a goddess in *þulur* (Snorri Sturluson, 1998, p. 114). It means something like ‘goddess of the army’.<sup>7</sup>

Concerning Hlaðguðr, several interpretations are possible. Guðr means ‘battle’ and *hlað* could be a feminine version of the masculine noun *hløðr*, ‘slayer, killer’ (LP, s.v.), yielding something like ‘killing battle-goddess’, not an unlikely name for a *valkyrja*.<sup>8</sup> It could possibly also be the noun *hlað*, an ‘embroidered band or ribbon’. Simek (1993, p. 151) interprets *hlaða* as ‘to weave’, reading the name as ‘weaver of battles’, which he then links to *Darraðarljóð*. This interpretation is perhaps not impossible but it is hardly an obvious one. The specific combination *hlaða spjöldum* refers to what is probably tablet weaving: ‘putting tablets of wood next to one another’ (LP, s.v.), as in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 26: *Húnscar meyar, þær er hlaða spiðldom* (Hunnish maidens, who do tablet weaving), where it occurs in the context of the precious and costly contents of a house.<sup>9</sup> As a verb, *hlaða* can mean ‘to make a pile’ or ‘to kill, bring down a person’ (LP, s.v.). If it is a *valkyrja* name, Hlaðguðr is much more likely to refer to killing; that it should have anything to do with weaving seems a stretch of the imagination.

The name Qlrún is different from the other two in that it does not contain the same sort of war-related image. It may relate in some way to the *qlrúnar*, ‘ale-runes’, in *Sigrdrífumál* 7 and 19, which are runes carved onto a drinking horn in order to protect against deceit from another man’s wife.<sup>10</sup> But in all likelihood, the root etymology of the name refers to good luck: ‘Qlrún is Egill’s swan-maiden wife in *Völundarkviða*, and *qlrúnar* must originally have been connected with Primitive Old Norse *alu* “good luck”’ (McKinnell, 2005, p. 212). The name probably means something like ‘magical protectress’ or ‘bringer of good luck’.

The two appellatives, *alvitr* and *svanhvít*, seem to be of a different kind. There are two possible readings of *alvitr*; it can mean ‘fully wise’, ‘all-knowing’ (this meaning occurs in *Háttatal* 99) or it can mean ‘strange creature’, as is argued by Dronke (1997, p. 255).<sup>11</sup>

*Svanhvít* means ‘swan-white’, ‘white as a swan’, and is remarkably easy to interpret compared to the other names. In stanza 2 she is said to ‘wear swan feathers’, which has given rise to the widespread practice of referring to all three women as swan-maidens, but the poem actually speaks of only one of them in this way and it is unclear whether it should be taken to describe all three of them. Even so, all three are said in stanza 1 to fly.

‘Swan-maidens’ are not otherwise known as a separate category of

beings in Old Norse tradition.<sup>12</sup> But there are other interesting references to swans. *Guðrúnarkviða II* 14 mentions *svani dansca*, ‘Danish swans’, as part of the picture, which Guðrún is embroidering and which also depicts *sali suðræna*, ‘southern halls’, and *scatar léco*, ‘men’s playing (at war)’. In *Völundarkviða*, the women arrive from the south, as migrating swans do, and *valkyrjur* are generally associated with ‘men’s war-play’. Furthermore, swans occur in a number of battle-related kennings in skaldic poetry, as doubles for ravens and eagles, birds often associated with war.<sup>13</sup> In *Völsungasaga* 29, the *valkyrja* (or shield-maiden) Brynhildr is directly likened to a swan: *hun sv(arar) af a hyggju af sinv seti sem alft af baru ok hefir sverð i hendi ok hialm a haufde ok var i bryniu* (Sword in hand and like a swan riding a wave in her helmet and coat of mail, she replies in distress from her seat; Grimstad, 2000, pp. 172–3).<sup>14</sup> A tradition for likening women generally, possibly *valkyrjur* specifically, to swans did exist at some point. How ancient or recent it may be is hard to tell.

*Gylfaginning* 16 links swans to Urðarbrunnr: *Fuglar tveir fæðask í Urðar brunni. Þeir heita svanir, ok af þeim fuglum hefir komit þat fugla kyn er svá heitir* (Two birds feed in Urðarbrunnr. They are called swans, and from these birds has come that species of bird that has that name’, Snorri Sturluson, 1987, p. 19; 2005a, p. 19). The association between swans and Urðarbrunnr is not explained. It could be due simply to the whiteness of both, but it could also tenuously link the birds to ideas about fate.

That the women in *Völundarkviða* are supernatural creatures is beyond doubt; their borderline nature reveals this: they span the human and animal worlds, they are found on the shore of a lake<sup>15</sup> early in the morning. The poem shows them just at the time when everything about them is liminal; they are between water and land, between night and day, between human and animal. But they do not easily fit into any of the categories of beings discussed in Chapter 2. As carriers of luck they resemble *fylgjur* — but *fylgjur* do not marry the individuals they are attached to. As women with *valkyrja* names they resemble shield-maidens, who have lineages and are tangible beings — but there is remarkably little ‘shield’ about them. They show little attachment to warfare, they carry no weapons, ride no horses, do not choose the slain and do not protect the men with whom they are associated; in short, they are not *valkyrjur* in any strict sense



of the word, as Völundr and his brothers are not warriors. These women appear to occupy that grey area where *fylgjur* and *valkyrjur* overlap with one another.

It is noteworthy that the one instance in Old Norse literature where terms for ‘spinning’ and ‘fate’ concur does not concern the *nornir*. Fate in this poem is not something imposed on the three brothers by the strange women; it seems, rather, to be a fate to which the women themselves are subject, namely that they must act like migrating birds and return to whence they came after a certain period of time.<sup>16</sup> There is little indication that they are in charge of or are manifestations of fate. Instead, their fulfilment of fate apparently consists in being what they are, namely of a different nature from their husbands. The prose may refer to them as *valkyrjur* but, unlike *valkyrjur*, they leave their husbands and, although swans do seem to have links to *valkyrjur* and perhaps *nornir*, these women themselves are neither *valkyrjur* nor *nornir*.

#### 4.1.2 *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*

The eddic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 2–4 presents the only direct evidence for *nornir* involved in some sort of textile-related activity.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the passage in *Völundarkviða*, however, spinning does not seem to be what is taking place here. Moreover, the poem is probably among the most recent ones included in the *Edda* (Fidjestøl, 1999, p. 221). The relevant stanzas read:

Nótt varð í bæ,  
nornir qvómo  
þær er qðlingi  
aldr um scópo:  
þann báðo fylki  
frægstan verða  
oc buðlunga  
beztan þiccia.

Snøro þær af affli  
ørloqbátto,  
þá er borgir braut  
í Brálundi;<sup>18</sup>

þær um greiddo  
gullin símo  
oc und mána sal  
miðian festo.

Þær austr oc vestr  
enda fálo:  
þar átti lofðung  
land á milli;  
brá nipt Nera<sup>19</sup>  
á norðrvega  
einni festi,  
ey bað hon halda.

†  
Night fell on the place,  
nornir came,  
those who were to shape  
fate for the prince;  
they said the king  
should be most famous  
and that he would be thought  
the best of leaders.

They twisted very strongly  
the strands of fate,  
as the fortifications were broken  
in Brálundr;  
they arranged  
golden threads  
and fastened them in the middle  
of the moon's hall.

East and west  
they put the ends,  
the prince should have  
the land between;

the kinswoman of Neri  
to the north  
threw one fastening;  
bade it hold forever.

Here, then, are the *nornir*, acting as creators of fate at the birth of the hero.<sup>20</sup> The term *ørlogþátto*, ‘fate-threads’, clearly conveys a close link between fate and threads, but there has been some disagreement as to whether the *nornir* are spinning (Dillmann, 2002, p. 391) or weaving (Larrington, 1996, p. 278; Davidson, 1998, p. 119) in this passage. Neither interpretation, however, will hold once the passage is properly analysed.

The verbs used to describe what the *nornir* do with these *ørlogþátto* are: *snúa*, ‘to twist’, *greiða*, ‘to comb out, arrange’ and *bregða*, ‘to braid, throw across’. Were the intention to unequivocally portray spinning, one would have expected the verb *spinna* to be employed. Moreover, the talk is clearly of several threads, three in all, one going east, one west and one north. Three threads are too many for spinning to be the activity portrayed and too few for weaving. Instead, it seems that three strands are plied or twisted into one thread.<sup>21</sup>

If a practical approach is adopted, the process of plying would, in fact, produce an image very similar to the one given in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*.<sup>22</sup> When a thread has been spun, it is often plied with either one or more threads, or with itself, in order to stabilise it before it is put to practical use; otherwise it will constantly curl back on itself. Single, unplied threads can, nevertheless, be stabilised using steam, but the risk of using un-plied yarn is that the finished product will be skewed because the yarn will have a tendency to pull in one direction.<sup>23</sup> Still, it is not uncommon to use un-plied yarn as warp when weaving (Baines, 1989, p. 60).<sup>24</sup> On a spindle, plying can be done by fastening the ends of the strands onto the spindle and, while carefully keeping the individual strands separate (see the verb *greiða* in stanza 3), twisting them together by turning the spindle in the opposite direction from that in which the threads were initially spun. This releases the tension built up in the spun strands, it makes them softer and also strengthens the plied thread by letting the strands twist into one another. Kure (2010, pp. 308–9), perceptively, likens the poetic image of the three strands of one thread to a tree, or to Yggdrasill, the world tree with the three roots stretching out each in their direction below ground, but above ground

all three ‘strands’ come together in one tree trunk. This parallel works in all sorts of ways — three roots that make one tree, three strands coming together in one thread, three *nornir* representing one fate. The different images may function as mythopoetic variants of each other.

The plying process gives exactly the same visual image as the one described in the poem: the three strands are held out each in its own direction, coming together in a meeting point at the top, and from there the plied thread stretches down in the middle with the turning spindle at the bottom.<sup>25</sup> Already Jacob Grimm seems to have thought of this with regard to what the *nornir* do in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*:

nowhere in Romance or German folk-tales do we meet, as far as I know, with the Norse conception of *twining* and *fastening* the cord, or the Greek one of *spinning* and *cutting* the *thread of life*. (Grimm, 2004 [1883], Vol. 1, p. 413)

The somewhat casual manner in which Grimm here distinguishes between ‘the Norse conception of twining’ and spinning appears not to have been understood by everyone, although some scholars, notably Steinsland (2005, p. 329) and Hansen (1911, p. 134), have grasped it.<sup>26</sup>

Initially, braiding also seems possible as the activity portrayed in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, as indicated by the verb *bregða* in stanza 4.<sup>27</sup> But, whereas braiding involves continuously shifting the loose ends of the threads, so that the motion takes place at the lower end, plying involves fastening the top ends so that the strands can twist together at the upper end. As the poem states not only that the *nornir* fastened the golden threads in the middle of the skies (‘the moon’s hall’) but also that the fastening thrown northwards was commanded to hold forever, it seems more likely that movement is taking place at the top end of the three threads.

This, then, is what happens in the one clear example of the *nornir* working with threads. Rather than spinning or weaving, the poem seems to describe plying: three threads are twisted into one, one end of each thread fastened in the sky (as held by the hand of the person doing the plying) and the other ends, where the threads split apart, are fastened in three of the compass directions: east, west and north. However, the textile analogy here cannot be disputed; the *nornir* are definitely engaging in textile-related work at the moment of settling the fate of the newborn hero.<sup>28</sup>

The purpose of the threads appears to be revealed in the phrase *þar átti*

*lofðungr land á milli* (the prince should have all the land in between). In other words, the thread is not a timeline, as is often imagined for a ‘thread of life’ which is cut when the person dies; it is a geographical demarcation in physical space. Something rather like this is portrayed in *Reginsmál* 14, where the blacksmith Reginn says of the young Sigurðr:

Ec mun fæða  
 fólcdiarfan gram;  
 nú er Yngva konr  
 með oss kominn;  
 síá mun ræsir  
 rícstr und sólo,  
 þrymr um ǥll lǫnd  
 ǥrlǫgsímo.  
 †  
 I will nurture  
 the battle-brave prince;  
 now the offspring of Yngvi  
 has come to us,  
 he will be a king  
 the most powerful under the sun,  
 his fate-thread  
 will remain in all the lands.

The compound noun *ǥrlǫgsíma*, ‘fate-thread’, corresponds to the *ǥrlǫgbáttr* in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, but the meaning of the last two lines is open to interpretation, depending on how the verb *þrymia* is understood. It either means ‘to remain in one place’ (LP, s.v.; Frtz, s.v.) or ‘to move rapidly forward, to spread out’ (KLE, Vol. 5, p. 314; Gísli Sigurðsson, 1998, p. 225). However, whether they are ‘extending’ or ‘remaining’, it seems clear that these fate-threads are somehow connected to a geographical area. This strongly recalls the plying image and here it should be said that *HH.I 3 und Rm. 14 bieten zugleich die einzigen expliziten Erwähnungen eines Schicksalsfadens in der anord. Dichtung* (At the same time, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 3 and Reginsmál 14* offer the only explicit references to a fate-thread in Old Norse poetry; KLE, Vol. 4, p. 177). These are the only two references and it is noteworthy that, of these two, *Reginsmál 14* makes no mention of the *nornir*. The focus is clearly on the threads alone; there is

no indication as to whether they are spun, braided or what they are made of — they are just there. It seems conjectural to link the *nornir* to this stanza, although it could be done via *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, arguing that the image in one poem is reflected in the other poem too, however latently. But this does not change the fact that there are no *nornir* in *Reginismál* 14.

*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* shows neither spinning nor weaving, but it does show *nornir* involved with textiles and fate at the same time, and so it may justify regarding the *nornir* as spinners, even if spinning is not what they actually do here. It is, however, the only evidence and that seems a narrow base on which to establish any extensive arguments about spinning *nornir*. Snorri does not know the image, nor does *Völuspá*. If it were commonplace in Old Norse tradition, one would expect a few more traces to be found; seeing that this is not the case, perhaps we are dealing with a medieval borrowing or appropriation (Weber, 1969, p. 124; Holtsmark, 1990 [1970], p. 85; Bek-Pedersen, 2007, p. 8).

#### 4.1.3 *Darraðarljóð*

But if not spinning, then what about weaving? Old Norse tradition has an absolutely exquisite description of supernatural weaving in the poem *Darraðarljóð*,<sup>29</sup> preserved in *Njáls saga*.<sup>30</sup> This portrays a number of *valkyrjur* (the poem has six, the prose twelve) who are engaged not only in weaving but also in battle. The poem, which is framed by two prose passages, describes in detail what happens on the loom as well as on the battlefield.<sup>31</sup> The poem is worth quoting in full (following Russell Poole's translation):

Føtumorgininn varð sá atburðr á Katanesi, at maðr sá, er  
 Dørruðr hét, gekk út. Hann sá, at menn riðu tólf saman til  
 dyngju nokkurrar ok hurfu þar allir. Hann gekk til dyngjunnar  
 ok sá inn í glugg einn, er á var, ok sá, at þar vátu konur inni  
 ok høfðu vef upp færðan. Mannahøfuð vátu fyrir kljána, en  
 þarmar ór mǫnnum fyrir viptu ok garn, sverð var fyrir skeið,  
 en or fyrir hræl.<sup>32</sup> Þær kváðu þá vísur nokkurar.<sup>33</sup>

1 Vít er orpit  
 fyrir valfalli  
 rifs reiðiský:  
 rignir blóði;  
 nú er fyrir geirum

grár upp kominn  
vefr verþjóðar,  
er þær vinur fylla  
rauðum vepti  
Randvés bana.

2 Sjá er orpinn vefr  
ýta þormum  
ok harðkléaðr  
höfðum manna;  
eru dreyrrekin  
dörr at sköptum,  
járnvarðr yllir,  
en orum hrælaðr;<sup>34</sup>  
skulum slá sverðum  
sigrvef þenna.

3 Gengr Hildr vefa  
ok Hjörþrimul,  
Sanngríðr, Svipul,  
sverðum tognum;  
skapt mun gnesta,  
skjöldr mun bresta,  
mun hjálmagarr  
í hlíf koma.

4 Vindum vindum  
vef darraðar,  
þann er ungr konungr  
átti fyrri!  
Fram skulum ganga  
ok í fólk vaða,  
þar er vinir várir  
vápnum skipta.

5 Vindum vindum  
vef darraðar  
ok siklingi

síðan fylgjum!  
Þar sjá bragna  
blóðgar randir  
Guðr ok Gøndul,  
er grami hlífðu.

6 Vindum vindum  
vef darraðar,  
þar er vé vaða  
vígra manna!  
Látum eigi  
líf hans farask;  
eigu valkyrjur  
vals of kosti.

7 Þeir munu lýðir  
londum ráða,  
er útskaga  
áðr of byggðu;  
kveð ek ríkum gram  
ráðinn dauða;  
nú er fyrir oddum  
jarlmaðr hniginn.

8 Ok munu Írar  
angr um bíða,  
þat er aldri mun  
ýtum fynask.  
Nú er vefr ofinn,  
en vøllr roðinn;  
munu um lond fara  
læspjöll gota.

9 Nú er ógurligt  
um at litask  
er dreyrug ský  
dregr með himni;  
mun lopt litat



lýða blóði  
er spár várar<sup>35</sup>  
springa kunnu.

- 10** Vel kváðu vér  
um konung ungan  
sigrhljóða fjöld,  
syngjum heilar!  
en hinn nemi,  
er heyrir á,  
geirfljóða hljóð,<sup>36</sup>  
ok gumum segi!

- 11** Ríðum hestum  
hart út berum  
brugðnum sverðum  
á braut heðan.

Rifu þær þá ofan vefinn ok í sundr, ok hafði hver þat, er helt á. Gekk hann þá í braut frá glugginum ok heim, en þær stigu á hesta sína, ok riðu sex í suðr, en aðrar sex í norðr. (ÍF, Vol. 12, pp. 454–9)

⚡

On the morning of Good Friday, this event occurred in Caithness, that a man called Dǫrruðr went out. He saw that twelve persons rode together to a *dyngja* and there all of them disappeared. He went to the *dyngja* and looked in through a window which was set in it, and saw that women were inside and had set up their weaving. Men's heads served as loom-weights and intestines from men as weft and warp, a sword as the sword-beater and an arrow as the pin-beater. Then they spoke some verses.

- 1** Far and wide  
with the fall of the dead  
a warp is set up:  
blood rains down.  
Now, with the spears,  
a grey woven fabric

of warriors is formed,  
which women friends  
of Randvér's killer  
complete with a red weft.

2 The fabric is warped  
with men's intestines  
and firmly weighted  
with men's heads;  
bloodstained spears serve  
as heddle rods,  
the shed is ironclad  
and pegged with arrows.  
With our swords we must strike  
this fabric of victory.

3 Hildir goes to weave  
and Hjørþrimul,  
Sanngríðr, Svipul,  
with unsheathed swords:  
the shaft will break,  
the shield will shatter,  
the sword will  
pierce armour.

4 Let us wind, let us wind  
the weaving of the pennant  
which the young king  
had before:  
we must go  
and advance into the throng  
where our friends  
set weapon against weapon.

5 Let us wind, let us wind  
the weaving of the pennant  
and follow the prince  
afterwards:

there [Guðr] and Gōndul  
who protected the king  
saw men's shields  
covered in blood.

6 Let us wind, let us wind  
the weaving of the pennant  
there where the standards  
of fighting men go forth:  
let us not permit  
his life to be lost;  
the Valkyries have  
their choice of the slain.

7 Those men will  
rule the lands  
who dwelt until this time  
on the outlying headlands:  
I say that death is decreed  
for the mighty king;  
now the earl has sunk down  
before the spears.

8 And the Irish will  
undergo grief  
which will never fade  
in men's memories;  
now the fabric is woven  
and the field dyed red;  
the tidings of men's destruction  
will travel throughout the land.

9 Now it is fearsome  
to gaze around  
as blood-red clouds  
gather in the sky:  
the heavens will be stained  
with men's blood

when our prophecies  
can spread abroad.

- 10 We spoke well  
of the young king;  
let us sing with good fortune  
many songs of victory:  
and let him  
who listens  
to tones of spear-woman  
also tell them to men.

- 11 Let us ride out fast  
on our bare-backed horses,  
away from here  
with brandished swords.

Then they tore the weaving down and ripped it apart, each one retaining the piece which she was holding. Then he left the window and went back home, while they mounted their horses and rode six to the south and the other six to the north. (Poole, 1991, pp. 116–19)

It is not possible to discuss all aspects of this poem here. Instead, the focus will be on the weaving motif and the ways in which this is relevant in the present context. *Darraðarljóð* is probably the most common point of reference to a link between textile work and the concept of fate in Old Norse tradition, and a number of scholars have interpreted the poem as evidence for this link, such as Holtsmark (1939, p. 93):<sup>37</sup>

*Darraðarljóð* er en visjon, og de som synger den, er en del av visjonene. ... Det er vevende norner i arbeid, de vever liv og død for mennesker; ... Vevningen er ikke ‘metafor’, den er magi. De vever og synger om det som hender — og det hender.

†

*Darraðarljóð* is a vision and those who sing it are part of the vision. ... These are weaving nornir at work, they weave life and death for people; ... The weaving is no ‘metaphor’, it is magic. They weave and sing about what happens — and it happens.

Holtsmark sees the weaving as an act of sympathetic magic; the *valkyrjur* are not only in the house in Caithness, they are also present on the battlefield near Dublin and their weaving directly influences the fighting. The women are, so to speak, weaving the battle and the web is symbolic of the fate of the warriors.

However, some scholars interpret the poem without involving fate, such as Poole: ‘similarities were perceived between weaving and battle in the type of persons who participate, the implements they use, and the appearance of the finished product’ (1991, p. 139).<sup>38</sup> He further argues ‘that “vefr” in *Darraðarljóð* is not a representation of fate but a reflection of the visual appearance of battle’ (1991, p. 141). Poole sees the weaving simply as poetic description with no magic at all; in his view, the weaving reflects the visual impression of the goings-on of the battlefield, the red and grey colours of blood and weaponry intertwining, and there is no hint at fate.<sup>39</sup> The crux of both interpretations rests in the weaving activity.

Part of the metaphor in *Darraðarljóð*, fate or not, is a correspondence between the activities of human women and those of supernatural women: ‘Just as weaving was archetypically women’s work ... so guidance of battles was archetypically the work of supernatural women’ (Poole, 1991, p. 136). Yet, if fate were not at all involved, the correspondence would concern only the visual appearance of these activities (guiding a battle looks like weaving) and would not extend to the deeper meaning of the activities so that the connections between weaving and fate ‘do not explain *Darraðarljóð* very well’ (Poole, 1991, p. 140). This argument, however, is not convincing, because it requires the poet to associate human women’s weaving with supernatural women’s power over life and death in battle — but then disassociate the *valkyrjur* from those powers, or somehow fail to notice that this could be seen as alluding to female supernatural guardians of life and death. This would seem a stretch of the imagination, and I believe that some idea about fate must have been in the poet’s mind.

Holtsmark, contrastingly, argues that weaving on a loom looks nothing like fighting on a battlefield and therefore something else must have inspired the weaving motif. She finds the link in the notion of fate and in the magical raven banner carried by Sigurðr jarl of Orkney in the Battle of Clontarf to which the poem is supposedly connected.<sup>40</sup>

The weaving motif in *Darraðarljóð* seems best explained as having to do with notions of ordering. Anyone who has tried their hand at it will know

that weaving requires a very high degree of precision, and this has implications for how the poem is read. Firstly, the battle is described in terms of a highly ordered and meticulous activity. Secondly, this appears to create a disengaged viewpoint for the poet, implying that the battle is seen from a supernatural rather than a human perspective. If this is correct, then the poem shows a group of beings able to foresee, if not manipulate, what will happen to the human men fighting the battle.

Being in the middle of a battle would hardly seem like that steady, concentrated, slow and very ordered kind of work which weaving is, and the mathematical precision required on the loom does not transfer easily to the individual warrior's view of the battlefield. Even if the poet is distancing himself from the battle, perhaps watching it without being involved, then he can be seen to adopt that higher perspective, which allows him to perceive some order in the tumultuous fighting. But there is more to the poem's image. Although much of *Darraðarljóð* can be seen as pure battle description, some phrases convey a different notion. In stanza 6 the *valkyrjur* say: *látum eigi lif hans farask* (let us not permit his life to be lost), which indicates that they have the power to prevent the king's death. Later, in stanza 10, they say: *Vel kváðu vér um konung ungan* (we spoke well of the young king), which suggests that their words matter for how the young king fares in the battle.<sup>41</sup> The phrase *ok siklingi síðan fylgjum* (and later follow the prince) in stanza 5 looks like a prediction of some future events, while the words *nú er fyrir oddum jarlmaðr hniginn* (now the earl has fallen before the spears) in stanza 7 sound as if they describe battle activity in close association with the weaving (see Warmind, 1997, p. 212). These passages appear to reveal that the weaving women do, in fact, have the power to influence the battle.

The weaving — the ordering and putting together of threads in a regulated manner — *is* that process of creating something out of nothing which takes place in the *dyngja* and which was associated with the *nornir* and fate above. The prose introduction to the poem imagines the setting as a *dyngja* but, even without this specific mention, the image of female weavers itself would be enough to conjure up the same idea.<sup>42</sup>

As mentioned, this is the only clear-cut description of supernatural weavers in Old Norse literature<sup>43</sup> and it refers specifically to *valkyrjur*, not to *nornir*. Yet Holtsmark (1939, p. 95) immediately makes the association to *nornir* due to the weaving motif:

De vevende i *Darraðarljóð* kaller seg selv valkyrjer, og navnene er valkyrjenavn. Som så ofte er begrepene *norn* og *valkyrja* løpet sammen. ... Vevende valkyrjer er ikke et hjemlig motiv; det synes også valkyrjenavnene å vise, ikke ett eneste av alle de 40–50 heiti skjaldene kjente, har noe med vevning å gjøre.

‡

The weavers in *Darraðarljóð* call themselves *valkyrjur*, and the names are *valkyrja*-names. As often happens, the concepts of *norn* and *valkyrja* have merged. ... Weaving *valkyrjur* is not a native motif; the names of *valkyrjur* also seem to reveal this, not one single example of all the 40–50 *heiti* the skalds knew for *valkyrjur* has anything to do with weaving.

Both of Holtsmark's points are important, but for different reasons. Regarding her first point, the poem itself makes no connection to the *nornir* and, although *valkyrjur* and *nornir* must obviously be considered related to each other, there is nothing to suggest that the terms were freely interchangeable. We cannot simply take random mentions of either and claim that they really refer to the other merely because this fits our preconceptions. The close association with the battlefield and the tangibleness of the females in *Darraðarljóð* fit much better with the general characteristics of *valkyrjur* than with those of *nornir*. Regarding Holtsmark's second point, it is noteworthy that the connection between *valkyrjur* and textile work is highly unusual in Norse tradition, although Old English tradition employs the motif, possibly deriving it from classical tradition (Holtsmark, 1939, p. 95; Weber, 1969, p. 121; Bek-Pedersen, 2007, p. 7).<sup>44</sup>

With this potential borrowing into Norse tradition in mind, it is reasonable to look briefly at the Old English references. The most relevant of these sources are *Riddle 56* of the *Exeter Book*, *Beowulf* lines 697 and 1942, the *Riming Poem* 70 and *Guthlac* 1351.

*Riddle 56*, probably from the latter half of the tenth century (Krapp and van Kirk Dobbie, 1936, p. xiii) reads as follows:

Ic wæs þær inne / þær ic ane geseah  
winnende wiht / wido bennegean,  
holt hweorfende; / heapoglemma feng,  
deopra dolga. / Daroþas wæron  
weo þære wihte, / ond se wudu searwum

fæste gebunden. / Hyre fota wæs  
biidfæst oþer, / oþer bisgo dreag,  
leolc on lyfte, / hwilum londe neah.  
Treow wæs getenge / þam þær torhtan stod  
leafum bihongen. / Ic lafe geseah  
minum hlaforde, / þær hæleð druncon,  
þara flana geweorc, / on flet beran.  
(Krapp and van Kirk Dobbie, 1936, p. 208)

‡

I was inside where I saw a piece of wood that was moving  
to and fro wounding a struggling creature; it received  
battle-wounds, deep gashes; darts caused it [that creature]  
woe, as did the wood skilfully bound fast. One of its  
feet stood still, the other moved vigorously, sometimes  
dancing in the air, sometimes near the ground. A tree was  
close by, [that bright one, where it stood] clothed with  
bright leaves. I saw what was left by the spears carried  
into the hall to my lord, where the men were drinking.  
(Whitman, 1982, p. 204)

It is thought that the solution to the riddle is ‘weaver’s loom’ or ‘web and loom’ (Krapp and van Kirk Dobbie, 1936, p. 350) and the portrayal of weaving as an act of violence involving the use of weapons has prompted Poole (1991, pp. 138–9) to suggest a connection between *Darraðarljóð* and *Riddle 56*. This provides an interesting image where a creative and a destructive principle combine in one and the same act: weaving. This accords well with the double nature of the female figures: they are both givers and takers of life.

*Beowulf* also combines fate and weaving. Line 697 contains the phrase *wigspeda gewiofu* (web of fate), which conveys the image very clearly. The passage refers to success in battle being granted by a supernatural power (see Robinson, 1985, pp. 46–7). Line 1942 contains the word *freoðuwebbe*<sup>45</sup> (peace-weaver), which is used to describe a woman who takes on a mediating role, either marital (creating an alliance between two families) or diplomatic (creating communal bonds within society; Hyer, 2005, pp. 35–8). The context in *Beowulf* is, however, a grim one. Lines 1931–43 tell the story of queen Modþryðo whom no one dared look at for fear that she would



have them fettered. The comment on Modþryðo's behaviour is *Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw* (such is not queenly conduct; line 1940), and it is not what is expected of a 'peace-weaver' whose role symbolises amicable ties between separate groups. Yet she becomes a virtuous queen after her marriage to Offa (lines 1942–62), revealing a peaceful side to her personality. Using the word *freoðuwebbe* about Modþryðo seems at first ironic, but it may hint at a duality similar to that of the women in the well — she embodies both a creative and a destructive principle.

The fate-weaving metaphor also turns up in the *Riming Poem*, verse 70: *Me þæt wyrð gewæf* (Fate wove that for me; Muir, 1994, p. 266), and in *Guthlac* 1351 (52v) [B text]: *wefen wyrðstafun* (woven decrees of fate; Muir, 1994, p. 158). Both are preserved in the *Exeter Book*.

Old English tradition thus seems to have been familiar with and to have employed this metaphor early on, possibly as a result of borrowing from classical tradition (Weber, 1969, p. 121; Bek-Pedersen, 2007, pp. 4–5). The metaphor appears to have been understood in Norse tradition, as *Darraðarljóð* and *Helgakviða Hundingabana I* show, but as far as the sources reveal it was not widely employed.<sup>46</sup>

*Darraðarljóð* furthermore recalls the famous raven banner, which Sigurðr jarl is given by his mother Eðna in *Orkneyinga saga* 11.<sup>47</sup> It plays a significant role in Norse traditions about the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, and, given that *Njáls saga* brings in *Darraðarljóð* precisely in connection with Clontarf, this banner merits a mention here. A noteworthy point is the fact that the poem deviates substantially from the surrounding saga prose regarding the details of the battle (Goedheer, 1938, pp. 74–87; Poole, 1991, pp. 120–5; Bek-Pedersen, 2008, p. 33), and it has been suggested that the raven banner is what has inspired the placement of *Darraðarljóð* in its present saga context (Holtsmark, 1939). This magically woven banner depicting a raven carried the promise of victory in battle for the person whom it was carried before.<sup>48</sup> The Orcadian link to Sigurðr jarl and the raven banner may also explain the Caithness setting of *Darraðarljóð*.

*Darraðarljóð* is followed by a short prose passage describing how the departing *valkyrjur* tear the newly woven fabric to pieces before riding off. The significance of this action is not explained, but Holtsmark (1939) suggests that this relates to the role of the *valkyrjur* as 'body-snatchers' of the battlefield, each taking her share of the fallen. Given the close connection

between what the *valkyrjur* weave and what they simultaneously say in the verses of the poem, however, it could also be interpreted in such a way that the torn pieces of the web symbolise the spreading of the news about the battle, as indicated in stanza 10 (see also 4.3). Alternatively, it may simply be the process of making the web that is important, not the finished product.

The scene in Caithness recalls the description in *Völsungasaga* 31 where Brynhildr, on discovering that she has been deceived and will never marry Sigurðr, tears up the tapestry she is making, depicting his heroic deeds: *kvað hun ser þat mestann harm at hun atte eigi sigurð. hun settizt vpp ok slo sinn borða sva at svnr geck* (she said that her greatest sorrow was not being married to Sigurd. She sat up and went at her weaving so furiously that the tapestry tore apart; Grimstad, 2000, pp. 182–3). After tearing the tapestry, Brynhildr begins to plot the murder of Sigurðr. Destroying the tapestry depicting his great deeds is closely linked to the destruction of the man himself and can be seen as a symbolic precursor of it. But, whereas *Darraðarljóð* seems more like an act of sympathetic magic directly linked to the event it purports to influence, there is nothing magical about Brynhildr's actions — the tapestry and Sigurðr are not the same, although it may be a symbolic equivalent of him.

*Jómsvíkinga saga*<sup>49</sup> 8 also contains a passage about extraordinary weaving.<sup>50</sup> The woman Ingibjörg has a dream:

Hon sofnar brátt ok dreymir hana ok er hon vaknar sagði hon Pálna drauminn. 'Þat dreymði mik,' segir hon, 'at ek þottumk hér stödd á þessum bæ, en ek þottumk uppi eiga einn vef. Han var grár at lit. Mér þótti kljáðr vefrinn ok var ek at at slá vefinn. Þá fell af einn kléinn af miðjum vefnum á bak. Þá sá ek at kljárnir váru manna höfuð ein. Ok ek tók upp þetta höfuð ok kenda ek.' Pálnir spurði hvers höfuð væri, en hon kvað vera höfuð Haralds konungs Gormssonar. (Blake, 1962, p.10)

✚

She soon fell asleep and she had a dream which she related to Pálnir on awakening. 'I dreamed,' she said, 'that I was staying here on this estate and I thought that I had a grey-coloured cloth in the loom. It seemed as though the weights were attached to the cloth and I was weaving. When one of the weights fell down behind from the middle of the cloth,

I noticed that the weights were the heads of men. I took up that head and recognised it.' When Pálnir asked whose head it was, she said that it was King Haraldr Gormsson's. (Blake, 1962, p. 10)

The loom with men's heads for weights, the grey colour and the death omen strongly recall *Darraðarljóð*. In *Jómsvíkinga saga* the dream is taken to predict the king's death and to reveal to Pálnir that he will avenge his brother by killing the king. Both texts use weaving as an image predicting the death of one or several men. But Ingibjörg's dream does not involve supernatural characters, there are no enigmatic words spoken and the scene appears quite normal until she stands with the head in her hand; *Darraðarljóð* is supernatural, mysterious and grisly right from the beginning. Whether *Darraðarljóð* has borrowed from *Jómsvíkinga saga* or whether the texts reflect a common root tradition is difficult to say.<sup>51</sup> The similarities can hardly be explained as coincidental.

Considering that the combination of weaving and warfare is as unusual as it is in Norse poetic tradition, it is of interest that a Norse *skeið* or weaving sword found in Greenland has engraved on it pictures of two sword-wielding characters (Roussell, 1941, p. 276; Østergård, 2004, p. 57).<sup>52</sup> The *skeið*, dated to between 1200 and 1300, also carries a runic inscription, now illegible, on its handle (Roussell, 1941, p. 276). The engraved picture proves nothing, but it is not impossible that it somehow reflects *Darraðarljóð* or some similar tradition.<sup>53</sup> It brings to mind the weaving tablet from Lund, which also carries a runic inscription: *Sigwarar Ingimar hafa man min [or: men-]grat. aallaatti* (Sigvor's Ingimar shall have my [or: sorrowful] weeping. aallaatti; Jacobsen and Moltke, 1942, pp. 358 and 611). The tablet has been dated to the tenth century (Jacobsen and Moltke, 1942, p. 1022) and the inscriptions sounds like a curse, although one that is more concerned with matters of love than with warfare (Flint, 1991, p. 231; Jesch, 1991, p. 46).

#### 4.1.4 Katla, Gríma and Guðrún

The link between fate and textile work may not be all that prominent in Norse tradition, but it does turn up. It overlaps with the link between magic and textile, for which there is also some evidence. It is nonetheless important to maintain that there is a distinct difference between magic and fate in

these contexts, and the most prominent examples of unusual textile work in *Íslendingasögur* illustrate this point well.

The two clearest examples are found in *Eyrbyggja saga* 20,<sup>54</sup> where Katla uses spinning-induced magic in order to hide a man from his pursuers, and in *Fóstbræðra saga* 23,<sup>55</sup> where Gríma uses spinning with the same intention.

In the passage from *Fóstbræðra saga* 23 (ÍF, Vol. 6, pp. 245–7), several things in Gríma's house interact to create the mysterious disappearance of Þormóðr: boiling seal meat, smoke, a chair with a depiction of the god Þórr and the spinning that Gríma does while she mumbles something unintelligible. Initially, the search party is distracted by the smoke, but even when they clear the air in the room they still cannot see Þormóðr, who is sat in the chair in the middle of the floor. It is clearly Gríma who is in control of the situation, but only to the extent that, as she tells Þormóðr, if he is fated to die on this day, all of this will not help him.

In the story told in *Eyrbyggja saga* 20, Katla also uses spinning in her magic. Here, it is clear that the pursuers, Arnkell and his men, find that her distaff is heavily involved in the goings-on at Katla's farm; at first they think that Oddr, whom they are looking for, is the distaff, then that he is the goat and the third time that he is the boar. Before leaving her farm the third time, they break Katla's distaff, as if intending to break the spell she has put on Oddr.<sup>56</sup>

The two situations are rather alike in their use of spinning as a magical activity and in the purpose of the magic, but these are clearly descriptions of illusions, not fate. The fact that Gríma notes how this scheme will not help Þormóðr *ef þér verðr bana auðit* (if death is fated for you; ÍF, Vol. 6, p. 245) indicates that she herself sees a clear distinction between what she can control and fate.

Contrastingly, Guðrún Ósvifsdóttir's spinning in *Laxdæla saga* 49 (ÍF, Vol. 5, p. 154)<sup>57</sup> is of a different kind. On his return from the murder of Kjartan, Bolli is met with Guðrún's cryptic statement: *Misjǫfn verða morginverkin; ek hefí spunnit tólf álna garn, en þú hefir vegit Kjartan* (A poor match they make our morning work — I have spun twelve ells of yarn while you have slain Kjartan; CSI, Vol. 5, p. 79).<sup>58</sup> While Guðrún is sitting at home spinning, her husband Bolli, at her instigation, kills the man whom she loves, Kjartan. This is not at all unlike the passages in *Völsungasaga*

31–2 and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 10–11 where Brynhildr decides that, if she cannot have Sigurðr for herself, she would rather see him dead; Guðrún appears to come to a similar conclusion regarding Kjartan (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 1997, pp. 134–58).<sup>59</sup> In her enigmatic greeting of Bolli on his return, she herself may equate or align her spinning with the killing — as if the two activities belong together or somehow mirror each other.

Concerning the identity of the women in these three sagas, Katla and Gríma have more in common with each other than either of them does with Guðrún. Katla is a widow living on her own, in charge of herself and her farm, and she is said to be beautiful but evil. Gríma is an old woman living with her husband far from other people; she is said to be *fornfróð*, ‘knowledgeable about ancient matters’, and, although she is portrayed in a more positive way, she shares with Katla a marginal societal position and traits commonly attached to witches in folktales. Guðrún, on the other hand, is of high social standing; she occupies a prominent position in society and is central to the saga plot.

The *nornir* do not engage in magical illusions, but in fate. This can perhaps also be argued to be the case with Guðrún, but hardly with Katla or Gríma. Any connection between these instances of peculiar spinning in *Íslendingasögur* and the *nornir* would hinge on the idea of *nornir* as spinners. The single occurrence of *nornir* working with threads (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 2–4), however, carries promising connotations of a great future whereas *Laxdæla saga* has a rather tragic feeling. The similarities that these saga women may have to the *nornir* are at best vague.

#### 4.2 The First Merseburg Charm

In this discussion of fate and threads, the *First Merseburg Charm* also has relevance. The Merseburg charms, recorded in an Old High German manuscript from the tenth century (Lindquist, 1923, p. 1), are geographically quite far removed from the Old Norse area, but certain resemblances to Old Norse tradition justify considering them in a supplementary way.<sup>60</sup> However, as the manuscript in which the charms are recorded is of a theological nature, and as they are followed by a liturgical prayer, the charms are not uncomplicated. While they can hardly be said to be Christian, they are preserved in a clearly Christian source context and can therefore hardly be said to be entirely heathen either. ‘Indeed, it would be more accurate to say

that the charms are not clearly Christian, than to state categorically that they are pagan' (Giangrosso, 2001, p. 113).

The *Second Merseburg Charm* is a healing charm and does not come into the present discussion, but the *First Merseburg Charm* does. It reads:

Eiris sazun idisi, sazun hera duoder.  
Suma hapt heptidun, suma heri lezidun,  
suma clubodun umbi cuoniouuidi  
insprinc haptbandun, inuar uigandun!. H.  
(Giangrosso, 2001, p. 112)

Translations of the Old High German vary somewhat. Giangrosso (2001, p. 112; compare Simek, 1993, p. 171) suggests the following:

Once sat women, they sat here then there.  
Some fastened bonds, some impeded an army,  
some unravelled fetters:  
escape the bonds, flee the enemy!. H.

These Old High German *idisi* apparently have the power to both bind and release warriors captured by their enemies,<sup>61</sup> and they have been compared both to the *dísir* of Norse tradition and to the Old English *ides*, a term for 'a well-respected woman' or simply 'woman' (Simek, 1993, pp. 61 and 171). While these terms would appear to share an etymological root, etymology alone is a fragile foundation on which to build interpretations (Weber, 1969, p. 11), and the terms do seem to be employed somewhat differently in Old Norse, Old English and Old High German traditions.

The collective group of *idisi*, however large it may be, is divided into three smaller groups, as the charm states that some tie fetters while others untie fetters and yet others hamper the army. A parallel is often drawn to the *valkyrja* name Herfjotr (*Grímnismál* 36; *pulur*)<sup>62</sup> meaning 'fetterer of the army', but the name occurs only twice, in neither context is there any action described and no other *valkyrja* names appear to have similar connotations. It is therefore difficult to argue that the charm should recall *valkyrjur* in general. Rather than the *valkyrjur*, the name Herfjotr brings to mind Óðinn's abilities described in *Hávamál* 149:<sup>63</sup>

Þat kann ec it fiórða:  
ef mér fyrðar bera  
bönd at boglimom:  
svá ec gel,

at ec ganga má,  
 sprettr mér af fótom fiqturr,  
 enn af hōndom hapt.  
 †  
 I know a fourth spell:  
 if men put  
 chains upon my arms and legs,  
 I can chant  
 so that I can walk away;  
 fetters spring from my feet,  
 and bonds from my hands.

This image is really rather similar to that given in the charm.<sup>64</sup> It may be that this ability of Óðinn's to escape from captivity — combined with his abilities to induce terror in his enemies described in *Ynglingasaga* 6 — has been given a personified form in the valkyrja name, or it may be that Herfjotr refers to a function of certain supernatural women akin to the *idisi*.

In the *idisi* of the charm, certain aspects of the *dísir* and *valkyrjur* amalgamate, namely the power to assist or ensnare warriors in battle. Furthermore, there is a striking similarity between the wording of the *First Merseburg Charm* and that of *Fáfnismál* 13. The *suma ... suma ... suma ...* of the charm and the *sumar ... sumar ... sumar ...* of the eddic poem must represent a formula of sorts.<sup>65</sup> Both passages concern the division of the same type of beings into three groups; in the charm they do different things, in the poem they are of different origins. It seems the charm is portraying a group of beings spanning the grey areas between *dísir*, *valkyrjur* and *nornir*, but there is no exact parallel to the *idisi* among the Norse counterparts.

The binding-and-loosening magic of the *First Merseburg Charm* probably represents practices that were known throughout pre-Christian Europe and persisted long into the Christian period (Flint, 1991, pp. 226–31), and there is no particular reason why they should not have existed in the Scandinavian area as well. The contents of the charm, however, while coming tantalisingly close, are not quite detailed enough nor similar enough to the Norse sources to shed much light on the *nornir*.

### 4.3 Text and Textile

In many of the instances of textile-related activities that have been discussed above, an important detail has been the inclusion of some sort of speech act. In *Darraðarljóð* the *valkyrjur* speak the poem as they weave, in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* the *nornir* say what Helgi's life will be like (*báðo* in stanza 2), in *Jómsvíkinga saga* 8 Ingibjörg names the king as she describes her dream. The relationship between 'text' and 'textile' goes far beyond the etymological link between the terms; there is a significant semantic overlap, too. Notions of speaking, reciting and determining connect closely to textile work, as Giannakis (1998–9, p. 9) notes:

'[W]eaving' a plan or a speech and weaving of man's fate by the [classical] gods are seen as parallel activities, and in both cases the metaphor is achieved by semantic extension of the basic meaning of words taken from the concrete world of manufacture, the world of sewing and weaving.<sup>66</sup>

Nagy (1996, pp. 59–64) provides a very clear example of exactly this semantic extension in his discussion of the archaic Greek metaphor 'sewing or weaving songs together', meaning 'performing songs'. He focuses on the compound noun *rhapsōidōs*, 'he who sews together [*rháptō*] the songs [*aoidé*]', which describes a poet, singer or performer. Nagy makes it clear that the speech-as-weaving metaphor is ancient.<sup>67</sup>

Both 'text' and 'textile' derive from the Latin verb *texere*, 'to weave', and it is perhaps telling that, in terms of etymology, 'text' is a later development than 'textile'; the woven textile came before the written text and weaving before writing. However, this also indicates that both can be forms of narrative.<sup>68</sup> That textile work is used as a metaphor for composition is amply evident in the vocabulary used about narratives and storytelling: words can be strung together, an epic may be interlaced with shorter tales, an unfortunate poet may lose his thread and perhaps have to fabricate; spinning a yarn means to make up an unbelievable story and a spell is something that can be woven as well as spoken. Textile metaphors are readily available for descriptions of words and speech, and Old Norse tradition shows similar trends. A passage from *Laxdæla saga* 35 contains an interesting phrase: *Síðan lét Kotkell gera seiðhjall mikinn; þau færðusk þar á upp öll; þau kváðu þar harðsnúin fræði; þat váru galdrar. Því næst laust á hrið mikilli* (ÍF, Vol. 5, p. 99) (Then Kotkell had a great *seiðr*-platform



made, they all went up onto it, there they spoke hard-twisted knowledge, that was magic. Next a great storm broke loose; CSI, Vol. 5, p. 50). The phrase *harðsnúin fræði* literally means ‘hard-twisted knowledge’, but it clearly refers to spoken words of a particular kind. The context is that Kotkell performs a magical ritual, *seiðr*, in order to call down bad weather on his enemy and capsize his boat so that he drowns.<sup>69</sup> The impression is that the knowledge that Kotkell and his family possess and the words they speak during the ritual somehow have the form of threads.<sup>70</sup>

The perceived link between, on the one hand, words and weaving and, on the other hand, magic was widespread in early medieval times; the German Corrector of Burchard of Worms (5.64), c.1008–12 (McNeill and Gamer, 1990, p. 321), says for example:

Hast thou been present at or consented to the vanities which women practice in their woollen work, in their webs, who when they begin their webs hope to be able to bring it about that with incantations and with the beginning of these the threads of the warp and of the woof become so mingled together that unless they supplement these in turn by other counter-incantations of the devil, the whole will perish? If thou hast been present or consented, thou shalt do penance for thirty days on bread and water. McNeill and Gamer, 1990, p. 330)

The parallel, indeed entanglement, of words and weaving is clearly evident here.<sup>71</sup> The prohibition itself is evidence that the practice was known and performed — unless people actually held this belief there would presumably be no need to prohibit it.<sup>72</sup>

A different way of combining text and textile occurs in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 14–16 where Guðrún Gjúkadóttir weaves the story about Sigurðr:

Sat ec með Þóro  
siau misseri,  
dætr Háconar,  
í Danmorco;  
hon mér at gamni  
gullbócaði,  
sali suðræna  
oc svani dansca.

Hofðo við á scriptom  
þat er scatar léco,  
oc á hannyrðom  
hilmis þegna,  
randir rauðar,  
recca Húna,  
hiqrdrótt, hiálmrdrótt,  
hilmis fylgio.

Scip Sigmundar  
scriðo frá landi,  
gyltar grímor,  
grafnir stafnar;  
byrðo vit á borða  
þat er þeir bqrðuz,  
Sigarr oc Siggeir,  
suðr á Fíóni.<sup>73</sup>

✚

I sat with Þóra  
seven half-years,  
Hákon's daughter,  
in Denmark.  
She embroidered in gold  
for my pleasure  
southern halls  
and Danish swans;

we two also made pictures  
of what generous men played at  
and on our handiwork  
the followers of the prince,  
red shields,  
Hunnish fighters,  
sword-warriors, helmet-warriors,  
the retinue of the prince;

the ships of Sigmundr  
glided from the land,  
gilded figure-heads,  
carved prows;  
we depicted in our tapestry  
how they fought,  
Sigarr and Siggeir,  
south in Fyn.

What Guðrún is doing is essentially creating a visual form of poetry (Norrman, 2008, pp. 15–72). The description brings to mind ancient textiles such as the Oseberg (Hougen, 1940), Överhogdal (Horneij, 1991) and Skog tapestries, the first of which comes from ninth-century Norway, the other two from eleventh-century Sweden, and all of which clearly consist of narrative elements and can therefore be ‘read’.<sup>74</sup> The vocabulary in *Guðrúnarkviða* features the verb *bóka* used for ‘embroider’ and the noun *skript* for ‘picture’, both of which highlight the intertwining of text and textile, words and weaving, because *bók* also means ‘book’ and *skript* also means ‘writing’. This semantic overlap between ‘book’ and ‘textile’ is also found in the term *þátttr*, which has the double meaning of ‘thread’ and ‘short tale’, although the latter meaning is rare in Old Norse itself compared to its popularity in modern usage. *Völsungasaga* 34 describes the same scene, stating that Guðrún made a tapestry *ok skrifade þar a maurch ok stor verk* (depicting [literally: writing] on it many celebrated feats; Grimstad, 2000, pp. 200–1). The intention with the embroidered *skript* in the poem is precisely to relate a story, to depict and describe in the textiles the heroic deeds of men, as could also be done by composing a poem about them.

The term *bók* (pl. *bækr*) is also used both in *Guðrúnarhvöt* 4 and *Hamðismál* 7 where it refers to blue and white decorative textiles used as blankets. *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 49 makes reference to *bóc oc blæia* (embroidered cloth and fabric; Bek-Pedersen, 2009). Dronke (1969, p. 228) says about this terminology:

*bækr*: coverlets embroidered with scenes or patterns ... The etymology of ‘book’ remains unsolved ..., and it is possible that the two senses ‘book’ and ‘embroidery’ are independent developments of an older radical sense ... The use of *bók* =

‘embroidery’ may also have been influenced by the fact that an embroidery could be ‘read’, its scenes interpreted, like a book; so the verb *lesa* [‘to read’] is used occasionally in Norse for ‘embroider’ ([such as] ... *Frostapingslög* IX. 9: *klæði lesin* [embroidered cloth]).

*Klæði lesin* literally means ‘read cloth’ but is employed in the sense of ‘embroidered cloth’. *Bók*, then, can be understood as ‘that which contains storytelling material’ or ‘that which records great deeds’, so that both a book and a tapestry can be referred to as *bók*. The Bayeux tapestry (Rud, 2000 [1983]) is a good example: a textile which contains both pictures and text. One of the strips (weave Ia) of the Överhogdal tapestry from Härjedalen in Sweden also features a short runic passage (Horneij, 1991, pp. 43–4). These runes are mirrored, indicating that they and, presumably, the tapestry should be read from right to left; the notion of ‘reading’ the textile is thus clearly indicated.<sup>75</sup>

Pictorial textile representation would have been a specifically feminine mode of narrative expression in Old Norse culture, as verbal poetry was a male-dominated form of expression:

The use of the pronouns *we* (við[vit]) and *they* (þeir) in the poem [*Guðrúnarkviða II*] indicates the gender division of the labour at hand; we (women) weave and they (men) fight.

(Norrman, 2004 [2006], p. 139, 2008, p. 57)

Men did not do textile work as women did not become warriors — nor did women usually become poets, at least not as often as men, if the sources can be trusted on this point.<sup>76</sup> However, female poets are not unheard of and, indeed, *Guðrúnarkviða II* itself is what Gísli Sigurðsson has referred to as a ‘female-orientated poem’. In it,

we meet with detailed descriptions of various kinds of embroidery, different techniques used for weaving and so forth, descriptions which reflect an insider’s knowledge and point to women as the most likely reciters of the poem. (Gísli Sigurðsson, 1988, p. 253).<sup>77</sup>

As the *skript* made by the women in *Guðrúnarkviða II* is a way of capturing and telling a story, giving it shape and structure using cloth, needle and thread, so did the poet who composed the poem itself, using speech and words. The poet, stringing words together, conjures up pictures and so the

story is told; Guðrún, threading her needle, embroiders pictures in a speechless, wordless type of storytelling.<sup>78</sup> Regarding the involvement of fate, it is worth noting here that one of very few suggested etymologies for the term *norn* relates it to the Swedish dialect verb *norna*, ‘to communicate in secret’ (Ström, 1985 [1961], p. 202; see 5.3.1). The *nornir* may not actually weave, but weaving is an obvious metaphor for what they do.

The intersection of text with textile is evident also in Eastern European iconographic tradition of the Annunciation, which often depicts the Virgin Mary as spinning (see 3.3). Western European church tradition employed this image early on, though the tradition was later discontinued (Badalanova, 2004 [2006], p. 217). Surviving examples of the spinning Mary are a twelfth-century fresco from the church of Sopre, Spain; a twelfth-century stone relief from St Anne’s portal of Notre Dame de Paris, France; a fifth-century sarcophagus (known as Sepolcro di Braccioforte) from Ravenna, Italy; and many others (Badalanova, 2004 [2006]). What Western tradition did instead was to focus on an image considered to be equivalent, namely that Mary was reading when she received the message from the angel. This is worthy of attention: that spinning (‘textile’) and reading (‘text’) were regarded as synonyms for one another in the context of (divine) conception. European traditions show many manifestations of this connection:

[T]he act of spinning (as an element of the process of making fabrics = texture, i.e. text) appears to be identified with the act of reading (i.e. coming into existence of the text, its verbal manifestation). Hence, it becomes quite obvious why the Virgin Mary conceives her Son the Logos by spinning or reading: in terms of mythopoeic imagery both actions are considered synonymous. (Badalanova 2004 [2006], p. 239)

Furthermore:

It is evident that, according to the traditional vocabulary of Slavia Orthodoxa, the cloth-creating female activities, such as spinning and weaving, knitting and sewing, as well as embroidering — which are often defined by lexemes denoting ‘writing’ and/or ‘icon-painting’ — are considered to be the classical female hypostases of labour, signifying birth/rebirth mysteries. On the other hand, spinning/weaving/producing cloth and

reading/writing (i.e. ‘producing text’) seem to go together in a universal system of symbols, standing jointly as synonyms for Divine Incarnation. (Badalanova, 2004 [2006], p. 244)

It is thus understood that ‘textile’ is not merely etymologically related to ‘text’ but is also seen as another kind of ‘text’. ‘Textile’ should therefore not be seen simply as a piece of cloth, but as an item conveying meaning: it can record historical events, mythical and legendary tales, it can convey aspects of social status or hierarchy, it can even be a carrier of magical protection, curses or divination (Norrman, 2008, pp. 16–21). Messages of various kinds can be ‘read’ from the cloth. However, in the modern Western world, this is hardly the first thing people associate with textile:

We rarely think about the work behind the production of textiles. In postindustrial societies, cloth is mostly factory made, and we therefore do not need to think about how long its production takes, let alone how long it took to produce in the ancient world. Weaving was time consuming and labour intensive. Therefore, cloth was extremely valuable. (Norrman, 2004 [2006], p. 127, 2008, pp. 27–8)

Textile was particularly highly valued in early medieval Iceland where the natural resources of the land did not make for an economy based on wood, grain or metal; instead, it became based on homespun cloth: *vaðmál* (Árni Daníel Júlíússon et al., 1989, p. 76).

The close relationship between ‘text’ and ‘textile’ goes some way to explain the fate-as-textile metaphor. Textile work is, in European traditions, women’s work, but it is simultaneously a means of conveying powerful although silent meanings and messages. In this way, textile in itself is not fate, but it is the equivalent of a specifically feminine voice which does not speak in ordinary words and therefore cannot be heard, but which is nevertheless as effective and significant (if not more so) as ordinary openly spoken words. The parallels between the ideas of speaking and of weaving make it easier to understand why fate may be seen as closely linked to textile.

#### **4.4 Summary: Tangled Threads**

The fate-as-textile metaphor does exist in the Old Norse material, but not to an extent where one can be careless about referring to it, and, on

the rare occasions where it is found, the *nornir* are usually not directly involved. The only text which does portray the *nornir* as directly engaged in textile work is *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 2–4, which in turn has suspiciously close parallels in classical tradition (Bek-Pedersen, 2007, pp. 4–5). The only text which unequivocally portrays supernatural spinners, *Völundarkviða* 1–3, does not contain a clear representation of fate, nor are the female figures *nornir*, and its traditions may be of non-Scandinavian origin altogether. The only text which clearly combines fate and weaving is *Darraqðarljóð*, which has several close parallels in Old English and Old Irish traditions (Bek-Pedersen, 2007, pp. 6–7). Then there is the reference to *orlogssímo* in *Reginsmál* 2; other than that, fate-as-textile does not turn up in the *Edda*, nor in skaldic poetry, nor does Snorri know of it. There are nonetheless a number of more or less muted references to fate-as-textile to be found in various parts of the tradition, such as *Laxdæla saga* 49, the allusive *valkyrja* name Herfjotr and *Jómsvíkinga saga* 8, and it cannot be denied that the fate-as-textile metaphor was present in some form or other in native Norse tradition from ancient times. It should also be noted that the fact that this metaphor was widespread elsewhere in Europe supports the idea that it was also known in Scandinavia. Yet spinning or weaving *nornir* remain conspicuously absent from the sources, certainly in comparison to how much they figure in scholarship.

It is possible to regard the sources as separating fate-as-textile into two levels, which are not all that easily disentangled from each other. The dominant level, clearly evident in the sources discussed above, connects fate to textile — but does so without reference to the *nornir*. The less dominant level consists of a symbolic correspondence between textile work and the dealings of the *nornir*. This division into two levels of the fate-as-textile image does seem to exist in the surviving evidence, although whether the evidence is representative of the ancient heathen world view is a different matter.

A significant aspect of the fate-as-textile metaphor is the ways in which textile intertwines with text, weaving with words and speech with writing. The association of writing, weaving and textile as silent or secret methods of communication can easily be associated with the concept of fate as undecipherable knowledge of the unknown which certain powerful supernatural beings are in possession of. This draws on the symbolic correspondence

between textile work and that which the *nornir* are said to do, rather than on the direct representation of the *nornir*.

In descriptions of what the *nornir* actually do, the vocabulary most often points to decision-making and the most prominent metaphor employed is fate-as-law (see 5.2). Textile work can also function as a symbolic representation. An image of law-as-textile would work when applied to cloth weaving (tapestry weaving is somewhat different; Horneij, 1991, pp. 26–8), because the warp can symbolise the law and the weft the different ways in which the law can be interpreted, realised or applied (Bek-Pedersen, 2009). The pattern in a piece of cloth is to a large extent laid down in the warp alone, and so it exists, albeit invisibly so, even before weaving actually commences. There are always different possibilities for how the weft may interpret the warp, though some are more logical and appropriate than others, but the warp itself cannot be changed once weaving has begun. If a mistake is made in setting up the warp, it will be present throughout the entire piece of cloth, whereas the weft can to a certain extent be unravelled to correct a mistake. In this way, the warp may be likened to a law or to fate and the weft to the chosen or the available options for realising the basic structure of the whole. If fate is like law and law is like textile, then the *nornir* may be said to engage in textile by extension. But whatever way the pieces are turned, the *nornir* do not engage much with textile directly. It seems to be the text, not the textile, which describes what the *nornir* actually do.

#### Notes to Chapter 4

- 1 Some of this material has previously been discussed in detail (see Bek-Pedersen, 2007).
- 2 There are many examples of such ready acceptance of spinning or weaving *nornir*: Holtsmark (1939, p. 93); Bauschatz (1982, p. 21); Ólafur Briem (1985, p. 209); Larrington (1996, p. 278); Grimstad (2000, p. 183); Winterbourne (2004, p. 92).
- 3 See Roy (2009, pp. 197–9) for a discussion of cloth-fulling and feltmaking, both highly skilled textile production methods of potentially symbolic significance.
- 4 See Bek-Pedersen (2009) for a further discussion of the fate-as-textile complex.
- 5 ‘Mirk-wood’ or ‘dark forest’, a legendary forest in heroic poetry, seemingly forming a border between the land of the Goths and that of the Huns; see *Hlǫðskviða* 18; *Atlakviða* 3, 5 and 13. In *Lokasenna* 42 it is a border between the realm of the gods and that of the *jǫtnar*.
- 6 Dronke (1997, pp. 290–2) discusses the names as two sets, arguing that the *valkyrja* names are a later addition belonging neither to the swan-maiden motif (see Hatto, 1961) nor to the story of Vǫlundr.
- 7 Hervǫr, one of the main characters in the legendary *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*,



- is unrelated to the eddic *Hervör*. *Vör* is an element in many female compound names: *Glaumvör*, *Grjótvör*, *Leirvör*, *Oddvör* (LP, s.v. *vör*).
- 8 The name is strikingly similar to that of Lathgertha, first wife of Regnerus (Ragnarr loðbrók) in *Gesta Danorum*, Book 9 (4.2), who acts like a *valkyrja* or shield-maiden.
  - 9 Tablet weaving (or card weaving) is done with very thin, often square, tablets of wood or some other durable material with little holes in them, typically one hole in each corner. Only quite narrow items can be woven using tablet weaving (straps, belts, etc.) though they can be very long (Collingwood, 1996).
  - 10 That it should be compounded from *öl*, ‘ale’ and *rún*, ‘rune’, giving ‘ale-rune’, is a somewhat doubtful interpretation.
  - 11 In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 26, Helgi addresses his *valkyrja* lover Sigrún as *alvitr*, but whether he intends to call her ‘very wise one’ or ‘strange being’ (‘strange’ perhaps in the sense of supernatural) is not clear. The double meaning could be intended as she may well be both.
  - 12 They recall the white dove-maidens of *Friedrich von Schwaben*, a Middle High German epic that shows remarkable parallels and contrasts to *Völundarkviða* (Bonsack, 1983; Dronke, 1997, p. 286; Nedoma, 2000).
  - 13 Eyvindr skáldaspillir’s *Háleygjatal* 11: *svanir Farmatýs* (Óðinn’s swans), and Einar Skúlason’s *Óxarflokkur 5: Gautreks svana* (Óðinn’s swans), which are ravens; Gopþormr sindri’s *Hákonardrápa* 1: *Jalfaðs svangæðir* (Óðinn’s swan-feeder), a warrior (who feeds the ravens, ‘Óðinn’s swans’, by killing men).
  - 14 I am grateful to Carolyne Larrington for this reference.
  - 15 The lakeshore goes well with aquatic birds but also with spinning linen. Linen consists of very long fibres with no elasticity and keeping the fibres moist helps the process. One would have a cup of water to dip the fingers in to keep the fibres damp while spinning them (personal communication from Freda Bayne, Holmwood Textiles, Orkney).
  - 16 Their brief role as visiting otherworldly women recalls the folktales about selkies found in Scotland, the Faroe Islands and Iceland (Jón Árnason, 1954, pp. 629–30; West, 1980, pp. 88–92; McPherson, 2001, pp. 13–16) or the tragic nightmare-women of Danish tradition (Tang Kristensen, 1928, pp. 154–8). Yet there is no indication that the men in *Völundarkviða* steal the women’s garments or otherwise force them to stay, as is common in the folktales. Ruggerinin (2006, pp. 215–16) mentions that there may be similarities between the ‘swan-maidens’ of *Völundarkviða* and the *idisi* of the *First Merseburg Charm*.
  - 17 The material discussed here is treated in greater detail in Bek-Pedersen (2007).
  - 18 Brálundr is the name of the place where Helgi is born. Kure (2010, pp. 123–30) interprets the name as ‘eyelash copse’, with reference to the creation myth where Ymir’s eyelashes are used to section off *Miðgarðr*, *Grímnismál* 41. He takes the name Brálundr to mean the world between the eyelashes, that is the world which is visible to humans — the human world.
  - 19 It is not clear who this kinswoman of Neri is nor, indeed, who Neri is.
  - 20 The scene is also described in *Völsunga saga* 8: *er helgi var feðr komv til nornir ok ueittu honum formala ok meylltv at hann skyllde verda allra konunga fregaztr* (When Helgi was born, norns appeared and foretold his destiny, declaring that he would become the most famous of kings; Grimstad, 2000, pp. 103–5).
  - 21 The thread made from three individual strands provides another three-in-one image akin to Hekate.
  - 22 ‘Plying’ is the technical term used, although ‘twining’ may also be used.

## The Norns in Old Norse Mythology

- 23 Personal communication from Freda Bayne, Holmwood Textiles, Orkney.
- 24 In turn, this may explain the double meaning of the English word ‘warp’. As a noun it refers to the vertical threads on a loom; as a verb it refers to a degree of bending or distortion. A warp consisting of un-plied yarn is more likely than one of plied yarn to yield a skewed result.
- 25 A similar structure image is found in Plato’s *Republic* 11, Book 10, 616 c–617 d, depicting the movements of the celestial bodies using the spindle as an axis mundi: ‘and from the extremities they saw extended the spindle of Necessity, by which all the revolving spheres are turned’ (Plato, 1987, pp. 388–9).
- 26 European saga material brings in the idea of ‘three sisters’ who spin, though the term *nornir* is not used in these instances: *Alexanders saga* V 79 (Brandr Jónsson, 1925, pp. 77, 134) in AM 519 a 4°, c.1280; and *Adonias saga* 33 (Loth, 1963b, p. 140) in AM 593 4°, c.1400–1500; but, as Icelandic translations of continental stories, these are rather far removed from Old Norse mythology in terms of both time and content. The earliest MS of *Alexanders saga* dates from c.1280, whilst *Konungsbók* dates from c.1270; this makes them virtually contemporaries and allows for potential influence from classical tradition in the eddic compilation.
- 27 *Bregða* has many meanings and can also be used to denote that an activity is brought to an end, that the appearance or constitution of something is changed, and, interestingly, it can mean ensuring that something which has been decided is not carried out as intended (Frtz, s.v.). This last meaning recalls the third seeress in *Norna-Gests þátr* and the last fairy godmother in *Sleeping Beauty* (ATU 410), the one who stops the good prophecies from swinging into action.
- 28 The scene in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* finds a very close parallel in a third-century Latin epigram by Martial (Marcus Valerius Martialis, Book 6.3; Lindsay, 1903), wherein spinning is clearly employed as the central image (Bek-Pedersen, 2007). This epigram shows the golden thread, the birth of a great hero who is a future ruler. It is not possible to prove that there is a direct link between Martial and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, but other scholars, too, have argued that *Helgakviða* shows classical influence: *Die Nornen-Darstellung in HH.I 2–4 zeigt Einflüsse antiker Vorstellungen* (The representation of *nornir* in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 2–4 shows the influence of classical ideas; KLE, Vol. 4, p. 171; see Weber, 1969, p. 124; Holtsmark, 1990 [1970], p. 85). Furthermore, classical sources frequently portray figures of fate in connection with births whereas this is actually rather rare in Old Norse tradition (KLE, Vol. 4, p. 173).
- 29 The name *Darraðarljóð* is used only in scholarship, not in the sources. The meaning of the kenning *vefr darraðar*, from which the name is constructed, has been the subject of some debate. It has been interpreted variously as ‘web of spears’ or ‘web of banners’, and the medieval compiler of *Njáls saga*, in naming the man who sees the weavers Þorruðr, apparently understood it as ‘Þorruðr’s web’. ‘Web of banners’ or ‘weaving of banners’ seems the most probable explanation of the kenning (Holtsmark, 1939, pp. 85–93).
- 30 The poem is found, with some variation, in different MSS, the earliest of which is *Reykjabók*, c.1300–25. I follow the text in ÍF, Vol. 12, based on *Möðruvallabók*, c.1330–70, with some changes: in the last two lines of stanzas 9 and 10, ÍF, Vol. 12, follows *Gráskinna*, c.1300 (now only in a seventeenth-century transcript.).
- 31 The imagery is vaguely similar to *Víga-Glúms saga* 21 (ÍF, Vol. 9, pp. 71–2) where Glúmr dreams of two women scattering blood over the district from a trough placed between them.

- 32 The image is one of reverse body-order with the heads at the bottom (they are normally at the top). The scene recalls the Celtic cult of the head (Ross, 1967, pp. 94–171) and also the Irish gloss *mesrad machæ, .i. cendæ doine iar na nairlech* (Macha's fruit crop, i.e. the heads of men that have been slaughtered; Hennessy, 1870–2, p. 36; Goedheer, 1938, p. 83).
- 33 The scene is not unlike one described in *Íslendinga saga* 165 [23; 28] where a man sees, in a dream, some women inside a building, rowing and singing gory songs; they have *valkyrja* names: Gunnr and Gǫndul (Örnólfur Thorsson *et al.*, 1988, Vol. 1, p. 165).
- 34 Onians (1951, pp. 343–8) discusses the Greek terms *καῖρος*, 'the target which archers aimed at in practice', apparently an opening or series of openings (*Odyssey* 19.573–80), and *καίρος*, 'the shed between the warp-threads on a loom', that is, the triangular opening through which the shuttle passes, carrying the weft threads. The image of an arrow shooting through a series of openings is not unlike the one conjured up by the wording of stanza 2 in *Darraðarljóð*.
- 35 *Gráskinna* here has *er sóknvarðar / syngja kunnu* (while slaughter-wardens / sing their song; CSI, Vol. 3, p. 217), quoted in ÍF, Vol. 12; I follow *Möðruvallabók*.
- 36 Poole (1991, p. 118) here has: *geirljóða fjöld / ok gumum skemti* (learn many a spear-song / and entertain men), following *Möðruvallabók*; my translation reflects the text in ÍF, Vol. 12.
- 37 See also Eiríkr Magnússon (1910) and Cook (2001 [1997], p. 343).
- 38 See also von See (1959).
- 39 More recently, however, Russell Poole has changed his mind. In a personal communication (August 2006), he told me that he now believes *Darraðarljóð* does portray an image of fate.
- 40 *Njáls saga* contains an account of the Battle of Clontarf and connects the poem to this battle. Some scholars have, however, pointed out that there are significant discrepancies between what the poem describes and what is known about the Battle of Clontarf (Goedheer, 1938, pp. 74–87; Genzmer, 1956; Poole, 1991, pp. 120–5), and it may be that the poem originally described the Battle of Confey, fought almost a hundred years earlier.
- 41 On the link between weaving and words, Eligius (c. ad 588–ad 660) objected to women who sought to exercise supernatural power through their textile work: 'No woman should presume to ... call upon Minerva or other ill-starred beings in their weaving or dyeing' (McNamara, 1997, Book 2.16). 'The power may have been exercised by weaving a curse into the garment to be worn' (Flint, 1991, p. 226). An example of a curse woven into a garment occurs in *Orkneyinga saga* 55 (ÍF, Vol. 34, p. 118), where Haraldr dies as a result of donning a fine garment intended for his brother Páll. See also Roy (2009, p. 199) for a link between textile garments and protective spirits called upon by muttering or breathing into the textile.
- 42 The prose introduction is strikingly similar to the Icelandic folktale about Gilitrutt (ATU 500–1) in which a man overhears a supernatural woman in a house that is half underground speaking words of a magical character while busy at her weaving (Jón Árnason, 1954, pp. 172–3 [181–2]; Simpson, 1972, pp. 73–5; see also Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 2003, p. 451; Bek-Pedersen, 2009).
- 43 Gunn (1932, p. 243) mentions that around 1768, when Thomas Gray's reworking of *Darraðarljóð*, *The Fatal Sisters* (Gray, 1966, pp. 29–31), was published, a version of the poem was still found in the oral tradition of North Ronaldsay, Orkney. Unfortunately, this version was never written down.
- 44 Lönnroth (1970, p. 23) explains *Darraðarljóð* as classically influenced imagery, more precisely as reflecting the three *Parcae* in Gautier's Latin poem *Alexandreis* of which

*Alexanders saga* is an Icelandic translation.

- 45 The word also occurs in *Widsith* line 6 (Muir, 1994, p. 241).
- 46 Bek-Pedersen (2007, pp. 6–7) discusses some Irish instances of an image combining weaving and warfare. Enright (1990, pp. 65–7) briefly mentions these too.
- 47 *Flateyjarbók*, c.1387–95, and other MSS.
- 48 This banner figures in *Orkneyinga saga* 11 (ÍF, Vol. 34, pp. 24–5), *Njáls saga* 157 (ÍF, Vol. 12, p. 451) and *Porsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* 2 (ÍF, Vol. 11, p. 301). Similar banners are mentioned in a number of Old English sources, notably *The Annals of St Neots* (Dumville and Lapidge, 1985, p. 78) and *Encomium Emmae* (Wright, 1939, p. 266). These are discussed in more detail in Bek-Pedersen (2009).
- 49 Various renditions exist; the following is from AM 291 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1275–1300.
- 50 See also Bek-Pedersen (2008).
- 51 MSS of *Jómsvíkinga saga* are older than those of *Njáls saga*, although this does not in itself determine the age of their respective contents.
- 52 This was found at the farm known as Austmannadal 5, No. 53d in the western settlement in Greenland.
- 53 In connection with the Greenlandic *skeið*, *Darraðarljóð* and *Jómsvíkinga saga*, it is of interest that *Skáldskaparmál* 75, stanza 460, lists *blóðrefill*, ‘blood-strip’ (*refill* is also the term for a woven tapestry), and *blóðvarp*, ‘blood-warp’, as kennings for a sword (see also Bek-Pedersen, 2007, 2009).
- 54 AM 448 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1686 (copy of the lost *Vatnshyrna* MS).
- 55 *Möðruvallabók*, c.1330–70 and other MSS.
- 56 For a discussion of Katla and her magical spinning, see Dillmann (1982).
- 57 The saga is found in many MSS; ÍF, Vol. 5, seems to predominantly follow *Möðruvallabók*, c.1330–70.
- 58 ÍF, Vol. 5, p. 154 takes this phrase from the very late MS ÍB 226 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1680–1700; *Möðruvallabók* and other earlier MSS have, variously: *mikil verða hermdarverk*, *hernaðarverk*, *hefnarverk*. The phrase has been much discussed (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 1997, pp. 134–7; Louis-Jensen, 1993; Ólafur Halldórson, 1973) with varying conclusions. Louis-Jensen (1993, p. 267) notes that the phrase ‘has been badly bungled in the manuscript tradition of *Laxdæla saga*, and critics have disagreed as to how it should be emended’. She goes on to suggest that it should read: ‘Mikil verða hér nú dagsverkin’ (1993, p. 270; ‘a great day’s work indeed’, my translation; see Jónas Kristjánsson, 1984, pp. 208–211 for various suggested translations). Certainty is as hard to come by as agreement in this discussion, but the authenticity of the phrase in ÍB 226 4<sup>o</sup> is seriously compromised by the lateness of that MS (Ólafur Halldórson, 1973, p. 126). Guðrún’s statement is decidedly enigmatic and may be interpreted in various different ways. However, scholars do agree on the idea that Guðrún’s statement, whatever the wording, refers to some kind of symbolic relationship between her spinning and Bolli’s killing of Kjartan.
- 59 Louis-Jensen (1993, pp. 276–8) discusses resemblances between *Laxdæla saga* and *Piðriks saga*.
- 60 Merseburg is in the lower part of Sachsen-Anhalt; Fulda, where the MS was initially discovered in 1841, is in mid-eastern Hessen. The MS, Codex 136 fol. 84r (85r in the old numbering), is now in the Merseburg Cathedral library (Giangrosso, 2001, p. 113).
- 61 Bede refers to something similar in his ecclesiastical history (4.22), where it proves impossible for people to bind Imma as the fetters are loosed every time they try. They suspect him of having access to loosing spells, but it turns out that the fetters loosen because Imma’s brother is having mass said on his behalf (Bede, 1969, pp. 403–5).

- 62 It is only found in the *pulur* of AM 748 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1300–25 (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar II*, 1852, p.490).
- 63 The term *herfjoturr* occurs in some saga texts, not as the name of a *valkyrja* but as a term for the panic that can strike a warrior during battle and prevent him from making good use of his abilities: *Íslendinga saga* 294 [144; 148] (Örnólfur Thorsson *et al.*, 1988, Vol. 1, p. 431), *Reykjarfjarðarbók*, c.1375–1400; *Þorðar saga kakala* 333 [25; 188] (1988, p. 508), *Króksfjarðarbók*, c.1350–70; *Harðar saga* 36 (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, p. 87), AM 556 a 4<sup>o</sup>, c.1475–1500. These instances of battle panic recall the description of Óðinn's skills in *Ynglingasaga* 6.
- 64 These abilities of Óðinn's recall Tacitus' description of the rituals of the Semnones in *Germania* 39: that a certain grove may only be entered by people who have been bound with a cord (Tacitus, 1970 [1948], p. 134). This description belongs to a much earlier period and bears no direct relationship to the Old Norse sources, though it may reveal something about the distribution and persistence of beliefs.
- 65 The formula also turns up in the fragmented eddic poem known as *Brot*, stanza 4: *Sumir úlf sviðo, sumir orm sniðo, sumir Gothormi af gera deildo* (Some roasted wolf, some sliced snake, some gave Gothormr wolf meat).
- 66 In Greek mythology, it seems that it is, in fact, more often the gods who spin than the fates (μοῖραι).
- 67 I am grateful to Dorothy Noyes for this reference.
- 68 Norrman (2008) gives an in-depth discussion of woven textiles as manifestations of narratives.
- 69 Heide (2006) discusses the relationship between textile and magic, comparing Norse and Saami traditions.
- 70 The Greek word σειρήν, 'siren', a female being luring sailors to their death with her beautiful singing, is derived from σειρά, meaning 'cord, plait, rope' (Lampe, 1961, s.v.). This combination of speech, binding and magical allure recalls the English adjective 'spellbound'.
- 71 See note 41.
- 72 See Roy (2009, p. 200) on the significance of different types of embroidery and their placement on garments.
- 73 *Konungsbók* has Fívi (Fife in Scotland); Nks 1824 b 4<sup>o</sup> has Fíón (Fyn in Denmark).
- 74 These tapestries furthermore recall the skaldic poems *Ragnarsdrápa* and *Húsdrápa*, which describe, respectively, a decorated shield and wall carvings depicting legendary and mythological scenes. The poems, then, are images turned into stories whereas the textiles are stories turned into images. Both poems are reconstructed from verses scattered throughout *Skáldskaparmál*. *Orkneyinga saga* 85 (ÍF, Vol. 34, p. 202) portrays a situation where a man is challenged to compose a verse about a man depicted on a wall hanging. See Roy (2009) for parallels between the creative processes involved in textile production, woodcarving and metalworking.
- 75 See Norrman (2008, pp. 162–3) for a discussion of this runic text. Runes are normally represented from left to right 'but in early times texts could be written from right to left equally well. They could even be *boustrophedon*, that is, with alternate lines in opposite directions. Even in left-to-right texts an individual letter could be reversed, apparently at whim, and occasionally a letter might be inverted' (Page, 1987, p. 9). It is interesting to consider writing in relation to weaving, especially weaving on an upright loom where you start at the top and weave downwards, just as you start writing at the top of the page, not the bottom. In weaving, however, the weft crosses 'with alternate lines in opposite directions' because the thread is continuous, whereas in writing the

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lines of words cross the page in only one direction and the writer has to lift their hand at the end of each line in order to start on the next.

76 Straubhaar (2002) and Jesch (1991) discuss some Norse female poets.

77 Arguably, the same type of insider knowledge is reflected in *Darraðarljóð*, which is, however, hardly a ‘female-orientated poem’ in the same sense as *Guðrúnarkviða II*.

78 Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 6.412–674 tells the story of Philomela who was raped and had her tongue cut out so that she could not tell anyone what had happened, but she wove a textile revealing her story in order to exact her revenge. Here, creating a textile is virtually equated with the ability to communicate verbally (Bek-Pedersen, 2009). I am grateful to Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir for this reference.

## Fate, Honour and Speech

One of the intriguing aspects of references to the *nornir*, found predominantly in legendary material, and to fate more generally in *Íslendingasögur* (which never employ the term *norn*), is that they often occur in conjunction with issues pertaining to honour and revenge. This overlap of fate with honour is only vaguely defined in the sources that portray it, as a latent backdrop, which is either simply assumed or not consciously realised, although the latter seems unrealistic. What seemingly happens in such situations is that legendary heroes and saga characters talk about honour (that is, socially determined norms and expectations of behaviour) as though it were fate (a supernatural force guiding events). This curious blending of what initially looks like very separate concepts will be explored below.

As parallels to this — and, indeed, to the fate-as-textile metaphor and the *dyngja* imagery discussed in previous chapters — come the fate-as-speech and fate-as-law metaphors. It is significant that the single most common description of what the *nornir* do is by way of a legal metaphor, and this symbolic equation of fate with law is worthy of attention. On one level, it seems immediately understandable, because law is what you must abide by and fate is what you cannot avoid. But on closer analysis, what does regarding fate as a law imply? This question will be explored below.

### 5.1 Fateful Terminology

Considering the terminology frequently employed in text passages concerning the *nornir* (*skipta*, *dómr*, *kviðr*), there must have existed a semantic link between ‘fate’ and ‘law’ — *ørlog* and *lög* — and it is telling that the element *lög* forms part of two of the Old Norse terms for ‘fate’, namely *ørlog* and *forlög*. Equally telling is the fact that not all words for ‘fate’ are employed in connection with the *nornir*.

Old Norse has six words that cover the concept of fate: *ørlog*, *skop*, *miqtuðr*, *auðna*, *forlög* and *urðr*. It is necessary to spend some time

considering these in order to properly understand the problems of translation that occur when discussing concepts from one language in another language, such as talking about Old Norse fate in English. Having said that, it must be conceded immediately that the lexical explorations that follow will not extend to anything near a complete analysis; the terms occur with such frequency in the corpus of Old Norse literature that carrying out very detailed analyses of their usage would necessitate a shift of focus away from the *nornir* and onto the linguistic terms themselves.

In comparison to the many terms in Old Norse, English vocabulary has only two or three terms for fate: ‘fate’, ‘destiny’ and *wyrd*. The common dictionary definitions make hardly any distinction between ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’, at times even defining them in terms of one another.<sup>1</sup> Both are explained as a supernatural power shaping the lives of human beings or as the events and experiences encountered by a person during his or her lifetime. They generally seem to have very similar semantic content (though see Wierzbicka, 1992, pp. 92–5, 103–6), but they obviously have different etymological roots: ‘fate’ is derived from the Latin *fātum*, past participle of *fāri*, ‘to speak, say’, pointing towards a sometime close semantic link to speech and words; ‘fate’, etymologically described, is something spoken (OED, s.v. *fate*). ‘Destiny’ is derived from Latin *dēstinātus*, past participle of the verb *dēstināre*, ‘to determine, to make firm’, revealing a semantic relationship to something akin to a law or decision giving shape and structure to events (OED, s.v. *destiny*).<sup>2</sup>

However, the discussion of English terms for ‘fate’ is incomplete without some attention paid to ‘weird’, Old English *wyrd*, which is cognate with Old Norse *urðr*. The relationship between *wyrd* and *urðr* has been debated often and discussions of the concept of fate in Old Germanic religious beliefs almost constitute a branch of scholarship in their own right: ‘One cannot even translate *wyrd* without committing oneself to a certain interpretation’ (Lieberman, 1994, p. 117).<sup>3</sup> Suffice it here to point out that, although *wyrd* and *urðr* are etymological cognates and have at times been considered to have the exact same semantic content, this should probably not be assumed solely based on etymology. The Old English term occurs much more frequently than does the Old Norse term, or the corresponding Old High German one, for that matter (Weber, 1969, pp. 14–19; see 3.1.1). This indicates that the semantic content of the terms either played a different



cultural role in the different languages or simply referred in Old Norse to something other than it did in Old English. Weber says this:

Wo immer ‚wyrð‘ in der altenglischen Dichtung mit dem Bedeutungsgehalt ‚Schicksalsmacht‘, ‚Verhängnis‘, ‚Tod‘ und ‚Verfall‘ auftritt, besteht nie ein Anlaß, diesen Sinngehalt als Relikt eines heidnisch-germanischen Glaubens an eine all-beherrschende Schicksalsmacht ‚Wyrð‘ begreifen zu müssen. Vielmehr ist diese Rolle des Begriffs ‚Wyrð‘ auf das spezifisch christliche Vergänglichkeitsbewußtsein zurückzuführen und im Einklang mit dem christlichen Weltverständnis, das die irdische Existenz als der Gesetzmäßigkeit des Wandels, Verfalls und Todes unterworfen begreift. (Weber, 1969, pp. 125–6)

‡

Although *wyrð* in Old English poetry always occurs with the meaning-content of ‘power of fate’, ‘doom’, ‘death’ and ‘decay’, in no instance does this allow us to consider this meaning to be the remains of a heathen Germanic belief in an all-powerful conception of fate called *wyrð*. This role of the concept of *wyrð* rather stems from the specifically Christian awareness of transitoriness and chimes with the Christian world view, namely that the earthly existence is understood as subject to the rules of change, decay and death.<sup>4</sup>

This means that, while *wyrð* undoubtedly has a heathen past, its occurrences in Old English literature may reflect a non-heathen understanding of the concept. Green (1998, pp. 374–91) discusses it alongside other Old English terms pertaining to ethics and fate that took on new, Christian meanings after the conversion so that heathen words were recycled, but in non-heathen, updated guises (see Robinson, 1985, pp. 29–59). The word has continued to develop and the modern English use of ‘weird’ is as an adjective on par with ‘strange, peculiar, odd, curious’, all of which can incorporate some aspect of the concept of fate, indicating that something is uncanny or perhaps not entirely coincidental.

The term *urðr* (see 3.1.1), with its close associations to death and the chthonic realm, has often been considered to have a strongly negative semantic content, but it is probably a mistake to interpret it one-sidedly,

as has been pointed out by Liberman. *Urðr* is etymologically linked to the verb *verða*:

The 'positive' meaning of *verða/weorðan*, *wyrd*, etc. also comes to the surface in formations with the prefix *ga-/ge-/gi-*. ... The noun *gewyrd* meant 'condition' and 'pleasure.' ... Relations between Germanic words without a prefix and their counterparts with *ga-/ge-/gi-* are sometimes hard to define, but this prefix tended to emphasize the perfective force of the derivative, its belonging to the class of collective nouns, etc., rather than to produce entirely new meanings. Since both OHG *giwerdan* and OE *geweorðan* refer to pleasurable emotions, this reference must be old, at least in West Germanic. In Icelandic, prefixes were lost, and it is not improbable that *verða* 'bring good luck' goes back to a cognate of *gawairþan*, just as some isolated meanings of *verða* ('lose, forfeit' and so forth) correspond to those of *frawairþan* and *frawardjan*. But *fra-* was endowed with destructive semantics, and *frawairþan* would have meant 'perish,' regardless of whether *wairþan* was neutral ('happen') or suggestive of success ('come to a good turn'), while *ga-* (*ge-/gi-*) was too weak to cover the distance between 'happen' and 'please, be pleased.' (Liberman, 1994, pp. 123–4)

If Liberman is right, then the idea of fate conveyed by the term *urðr* is unlikely to have been inherently negative; things did not always turn out badly, sometimes they turned out well. Similarly, the *nornir* had a benign aspect (good fate), even if they came to be associated predominantly with their sinister aspect (evil fate). They are described as *grimmar urðir*, *liótar nornir*, *aumlig norn*, while it is less easy to find descriptions employing positive adjectives.

Regarding etymology, *urðr* is related to the Latin verb *vertere*, 'to turn' (ÁBM, s.v.; AeW, s.v.) (see 3.1.1). The suggestion that it consequently refers to fate as something wound, twisted or spun (AeW, p. 636) should, however, not be assumed too readily (see ÁBM, p. 1090). The parallels to 'winding' and 'turning' are well founded, but the link to 'spinning' is based on etymology hypothetically combined with the notion of a turning spindle, not on linguistic evidence. Old Norse never makes a direct connection between *urðr* and 'spinning'. The '*urðr*–turning–creating' complex is perfectly acceptable

(see 3.1.1), but I remain sceptical about linking *urðr* directly with *spinna*. The link between the two is highly metaphorical — just as we never think of spinning when we speculate on how things will ‘turn out’.

It is evident that language is not static, meanings of words are not solid and unchanging; they are, in fact, the very opposite. Although a word can remain the same in terms of spelling and pronunciation through an extended period of time, what is meant by that word is not necessarily the same throughout that period. We need words in order to communicate, but we also need to keep in mind that words are provisional and revisable.<sup>5</sup> Although their semantic content can be traced back to a certain root meaning, this does not guarantee that they continue to convey that same root meaning through long periods of time (Weber, 1969, p. 11). The case of ‘weird’ proves the point; *wyrd* obviously had a meaning in pre-Christian England, although exactly what that meaning was remains somewhat unclear to us, and the frequent use of the term in Old English literature suggests that it underwent an adaptation process allowing it to continue to be used extensively in Christian texts. As noted above, in modern English, ‘weird’ does not refer to a supernatural force but has an almost entirely secular meaning; it has even shifted word class, from noun to adjective.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the root meanings of words, however interesting, can reveal only the origins of the word, not how far removed from such origins the semantic content of the same word may be at any given time. It can be difficult to find that balance between etymological and contemporary meanings in Old Norse vocabulary, as we cannot be sure that the words encountered in the manuscript sources are used in their original etymological sense. At times we can, in fact, be sure that they are not. Nevertheless, etymology provides at least a starting point.

The mere fact that Old Norse has so many words for ‘fate’ suggests two things: firstly, that the concept was important, well known and widespread; secondly, that these words must originally have had semantic contents somewhat different from one another — why else would there be six separate words with unrelated etymologies?<sup>7</sup>

The first point to note is that some of the terms are more relevant to the *nornir* than others are. For example, *miqtuðr* and *auðna* are never directly connected to the *nornir* whereas *urðr*, *skǫp* and *ørlog* are.<sup>8</sup>

There are two distinct etymological explanations offered for *ørlog* (n. pl.). The most common suggestion is that the element *ør* is used in the sense of

‘ancient’ so that the word means ‘that which was laid down in ancient times’ or ‘primal laws’, a sort of ‘ur-law’ going back to the dawn of time (AeW, s.v.; C/V, s.v.; LP, s.v.), giving the impression of something that constitutes the basic, initial foundation. The same dictionary entries explain that it can also be employed with the meaning ‘end’ (ÁBM, s.v.; Frtz, s.v. *órlög*) or refer to a person’s ‘exploits, experiences in life’ (C/V, s.v.; LP, s.v.). The other suggestion is that *ør* is, in fact, a version of the preposition *úr*, meaning ‘out of, from’ (Kure, 2010, pp. 305–6), so that the word means something more along the lines of ‘that out of which something is laid down’. If this understanding is correct, then *ørlog* indicates not so much a prescriptive concept, a fate already determined, but more a potential from which a variety of possibilities can be derived. This latter meaning thus leaves a certain amount of choice open to the person whose fate the term describes, because, although the material is given, the result is whatever you make it — like the wool in the wool basket, which will never make a linen shirt, but may produce a variety of woollen goods. Even so, whichever way *ørlog* is interpreted, it indicates a given; and whether it indicates a given, basic law or a given out of which a law is derived, the legal metaphor is clear.

The meaning of *forlog* (n. pl.) is the life allotted to man by the powers of fate (Frtz, s.v.) and with the etymological meaning ‘fore-law’ (C/V, s.v.), laws laid down beforehand, its root meaning comes very close to the more common interpretation of *ørlog*.

In many contexts, these two terms are used completely interchangeably,<sup>9</sup> which makes it interesting that *forlog* never occurs in connection with the *nornir*, whereas *ørlog* does. Thus, there appears to be some degree of semantic distinction between them, although both continue to be used in Christian contexts. While both words may indicate something like a given set of rules, a fundamental structure that cannot be avoided or changed, it is possible that the important distinction between them comes in through the second interpretation of *ørlog*, namely that it is precisely not a law given beforehand, but only the stuff out of which laws can be derived.

The term *skap* (n. pl.), plural of *skap* (n.), has several nuances of meaning from the ‘state, condition’ of something to ‘state of mind, temper, mood’ (AeW, s.v.; C/V, s.v.), and is related to the verb *skapa*, ‘to create, organize, put in order’ (ÁBM, s.v.; AeW, s.v.). The word is cognate with the English ‘shape’ and with the Danish noun *skæbne*, ‘fate’, and verb *skabe*, ‘to create’.

It indicates something done with a purpose, giving shape to things and arranging them in some coherent way, although the coherence may not always be apparent to the human eye. There may even be a hint of fickleness present through the meaning ‘state of mind, mood’, as if *skop* were an unpredictable or moody sort of force — not to be reasoned with.

*Skop* can also convey that something happens in a ‘natural’ way, as is the case in *Ynglingatal* 9: *ef Agna her Skjalfar røð at skopum þóttu* (if Agni’s army has found Skjalf’s deed natural; *Ynglingasaga* 19, ÍF, Vol. 26, p. 38; see Strömbäck, 1970, pp. 201–8). It is even adapted to describe the rule of the Christian God, for example in Þórarinn stuttfeldr’s twelfth-century *Stuttfeldardrápa* 2: *við skop goðs* (by the rule of God; *Magnússona saga* 3, ÍF, Vol. 28, p. 239). This also indicates that *skop* is not conceived of in an entirely negative way but can refer to events which occur the way they should, in a natural way.<sup>10</sup> This aspect of *skop* comes close to a legal or quasi-legal sense.

Furthermore, *skop* is the term most commonly used to describe ‘fate’ as it is represented by the *nornir*. The combination of *nornir* or *norn* with *skop*, or forms of the verb *skapa*, occurs at least five times in eddic and skaldic poetry, whereas the combination of *nornir* with *ørlog* occurs only twice, and *forlog*, *miptuðr* and *auðna* are nowhere linked directly to the *nornir* (although *Krákumál* 24 employs *forlog* and *skop* apparently synonymously).

It is difficult to discover the exact nuances of different semantic content attached to these three terms, *ørlog*, *forlog* and *skop*. Fritzner (s.v.v.) hardly distinguishes one from the other, though some of this is undoubtedly due to the difficulties of translating into a language that has a limited vocabulary for the concept — something also evident in *Lexicon Poeticum*:

*Ørlog*: (1) what has been decided from the beginning, fate;

(2) fate, i.e. what has been experienced, exploits (LP, s.v.)

*Forlog*: fate (LP, s.v.)

*Skop*: what has been (pre-)determined, fate (LP, s.v.)

In all cases, the separate Old Norse terms are translated into the one Danish term: *skæbne*, ‘fate’. The result is a sort of funnel translation in the sense that the wider spectrum present in one language is translated into one monochrome meaning in the other: several different words translate into the same one word. Any slight difference in meaning between the Old Norse terms is in danger of being lost in translation due to the scarcity of terms covering

the concept in modern English and in the Scandinavian languages. Danish uses only one word, *skæbne*, Swedish uses only *öde*, Norwegian has *skjebne* alongside the more archaic *lagnad*, although there seems to be little distinction between them, while English uses ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’, which appear to be rather tangled up in each other. This makes it hard to translate, even to discover, the nuances of meaning contained in Old Norse vocabulary. English and the Scandinavian languages simply do not have enough equivalent terms.

These lexical considerations show that there are several nuances of meaning incorporated into the Old Norse notion of fate. As mentioned, obtaining clarity about exactly where lines may be drawn between the semantic contents of the separate words would require a much more detailed study than can be provided here. Interestingly, it is hard to see a clear distinction between heathen and Christian ways of thinking with regard to these terms.<sup>11</sup> It does appear that some words were more acceptable to the church than others, but whether this is because they were considered somehow less heathen, less damaging, whether they were easier to manipulate and adapt, or whether they were simply so deeply ingrained that they were impossible to weed out is hard to tell. As far as the *nornir* are concerned, the nouns *skop* and *ørløg* are the dominant ones for describing what they represent, although both words continue to be used after the end of the heathen period and remain in use even today.

Both *skop* and *ørløg* convey notions of fate that are easily likened to laws. *Skop* and *ørløg* give shape to the un-shaped; they establish a pattern, a set of rules and boundaries, rather like the warp does to a woven cloth. *Ørløg* directly associates itself to the notion of law, to that which has been or will be laid down on the foundational levels and on which everything else rests or will rest. An important difference between *løg* and *ørløg* is that the law is valid for the entire society, everyone must adhere to it, and the one who does not do so is outlawed — which is equivalent to being put outside of society. The association of law with society is well established in Old Norse tradition (see 5.2). Fate, on the other hand, is like a law that operates on the level of the individual.<sup>12</sup> It is a person’s individual ‘law’ which is given to them at birth and which they cannot go beyond. They may interpret this ‘law’ in a variety of ways, but they cannot ‘break’ it. Moreover, this ‘law’ is ruthless and adheres neither to social nor to human norms, although it does maintain order of a kind.

Thus, the underlying principle of fate and of law may be the exact same one — they establish and maintain order — but they operate on separate levels: law is open, known and external, created by the community for the community; fate is secret, unknown and internal, laid down for the individual person by an unseen, uncontrolled and uncontrollable force.

## 5.2 Fate as Law and as Honour

That the concept of law was important in Old Norse society<sup>13</sup> is testified by the multitude of legal issues that are described in detail in many *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>14</sup> But in Old Norse culture, law was not just a tool brought into action for defining and processing disputes, it was inseparably intertwined with definitions of what constituted human society.<sup>15</sup> In this way, it was more a way of life in the same sense as when we today speak of customs, practices and traditions:

Law was part of life in Iceland and was perceived as such. *Vár lög* ('our law') was our community as opposed to others ...

But *lög* was not just undifferentiated custom either. Law was in a narrower sense the positive law, the formal legal process and the rules applied and enforced in the courts. (Miller, 1990, p. 221)

Thus, people regarded the law as the foundation of human society wherein the individual followed and protected the norms dictated by kinship and by the wider culture: 'Norms of good kinship provided the basis for imposing legal obligation, which in turn buttressed the norms and so on in continual feedback of mutual influence' (Miller, 1990, p. 221). The distinction between laws and norms in early medieval Scandinavia is a fine one:

In those instances in which the law codified well-established patterns of behavior, adherence to the rule would tell us less about respect for the law than about the law's respect for customary behavior. ... But in those cases where the law tried to alter and restrict established patterns of behavior, and even in those cases where the law was lending its force to well-established behavioural patterns, it would seem that people thought sanction was more likely to induce compliance or prevent deviance than an abstract respect for laws as Law. (Miller, 1990, pp. 229–30)

Law, then, is shorthand for ‘the way things should be’, not unlike the usage of *skop* that indicates a natural course of events, and not unlike the term *siðr* and the phrase *forn siðr*, ‘ancient ways, customs’, which is as close as Old Norse comes to a description of the concept of ‘religion’.<sup>16</sup> The modern distinction between secular and religious prescriptions is difficult to perceive in Old Norse, because both are closely tied to notions of ‘customary practice’ as such. *Siðr* describes traditions and norms alike, the way the ancestors did things and the way things should be done now.

It is important to note that the law is not given by the gods but by the ancestors, thus having its roots in human society, not in divine spheres (Green, 1998, pp. 374–5). Still, there are certain close connections between the human and divine levels in regard to legal matters. In human society, a *þingstaðr* or assembly place was an area marked off as special and proceedings taking place within that area involved gods and humans alike.<sup>17</sup>

The divine powers were also involved with the conduct of the public assemblies for discussion, legislation and justice. An assembly was hallowed in some way at the outset, presumably by sacrifice and invocation, and its sanctity prevailed over the defined area within which it took place and for the length of time it lasted. (Foote and Wilson, 1980 [1970], p. 402)

The blending together of laws, norms and religious beliefs also shines through on the cosmological level because the Old Norse gods, at least according to Snorri, hold their assemblies in the place from which the *nornir* are said to originate in *Gylfaginning* 15: *Þriðja rót asksins stendr á himni, ok undir þeiri rót er brunnr sá er mjök er heilagr er heitir Urðar brunnr. Þar eigu guðin dómstað sinn* (The third root of the ash extends to heaven, and beneath that root is a well which is very holy, called Weirð’s well. There the gods have their court...; Snorri Sturluson, 1987, p. 17; 2005a, p. 17). The idea of merging the well of the *nornir* with a divine court is echoed in *Hávamál* 111. There is no sense of the gods being subject to the decisions of the *nornir* or to fate in the same way as humans are, and exactly what the relationship between the gods and the *nornir* consists in is hard to determine. It does not seem to be hierarchical, and the two categories of supernatural beings do not often occur together in the literary tradition. But they share in being central and peripheral at the same time — important to humans and to the human world, but not directly engaged in it. In terms



of human society, the *normir* are not connected to the *þing*, their law is of a different nature; the connection between *lög* and *ørlog* is not direct. On the cosmological level, the *normir* are lurking about in the well under the tree beneath which the gods have their assembly; but they do not partake in the assembly. While humans concern themselves with *lög* on the surface, the *normir* concern themselves with the deeper levels, with *ørlog*, the basic material, the warp, the very foundation for human life. As *lög* forms the basis of organised human society, so *ørlog* forms the basis of human life in the first place, recalling *Völuspá* 17 where the first humans, Ask and Embla, are *litt megandi and ørløglausa* (lacking in capability) and ‘without *ørlog*’, and therefore not quite proper humans yet.

The last four lines of *Völuspá* 20 say this about the *normir*:

Þær lög lögðo,  
þær líf kuro  
alda börnum,  
ørlog seggia.

‡

They laid down laws,  
they chose life  
for the children of men,  
the fate of men.

Only the first two lines employ verbs: *leggia* and *kiósa*, attached to, respectively, the nouns *lög* and *líf*. The last two lines can be read using either verb, as *þær lögðo ørlog seggia* (they laid down the fate of men) or *þær kuro ørlog seggia* (they chose the fate of men). The verb *kiósa* may indicate that a range of choices is available to the one who makes the choice, or it may indicate the process of selecting the one appropriate candidate from a group of candidates rather than choosing between several suitable candidates.<sup>18</sup> Both of these two rather different actions may be described using the same verb. But regardless of whether this verb is understood as ‘choose’ or ‘select’, the sentence is more likely to refer back to the immediately preceding verb, *kiósa*, than to a verb further back in the text. Thus, the last line is most likely to form a pair with the penultimate line, both describing what the *normir* chose (see 5.3).

The use of the verb *leggia* lends an almost physical feel to the image, recalling *skop*; there is the law, being shaped and laid down for the children

of men. The notion of giving shape to and making usable is present in both verbs; both carry the gloss of decision-making and creation, albeit in slightly different ways.

The alliterating pair *líf* and *leggja* turn up in a couple of other places. In the last lines of *Skírnismál* 13, Skírnir says:

eino dægri  
mér var aldr um scapaðr  
oc alt líf um lagið.  
✚  
on one day  
all my life was shaped  
and my whole life laid down.

The same phrase is used in *Lokasenna* 48:

Þegi þú, Heimdallr,  
þér var í árdaga  
iþ lióta líf um lagit;  
✚  
Be quiet, Heimdallr,  
for you at the dawn of time  
a detestable life was laid down;

Here, whole lives are laid down and fixed at one point in time. The impression is that a person's life has been staked out even before they begin living it and this makes it clear that fate is really a supratemporal concept, because the person's fate seems to be there even before the person is. Fate exists outside of time. Time is not the creator nor the determinant of lives, but it is the force that actualises them. The phrase *líf um lagit* would appear to be formulaic.

The etymology of the noun *lög* suggests 'layers' and 'laying down'; the *lög* is laid down just as the *líf* is in the stanzas quoted above.<sup>19</sup> The *lög*–*örlog* link is clearly evident in the tradition, but it is important to note that there is no direct linkage between the *nornir* and the law as this operated in human society. The 'law' or, rather, quasi-law that the *nornir* represent is very personal and concerns the individual on a deep level, but it is not up for discussion and neither negotiation nor arbitration is possible. It is as it is and it was given without consulting the individual concerned.

The key to the legal metaphor characterising the *nornir* may be the same as was found to be the case for the fate-as-textile metaphor, namely that

‘law’ (court cases and legal disputes) is not what the *nornir* actually do, but what they do is similar to laying down ‘laws’; choice, selection and decision are core concepts. This may explain why the metaphor is so common: as *lög* can act as the definition of a society realised through its official institutions, so *orlög* can act as the definition of the individual realised through their actions over time. At heart, the principle at work is the same, but one is created by humans and is manifest on the surface, while the other is beyond human control and exists on a much deeper level. The correspondence is metaphorical rather than actual.

Law goes hand in hand with order as a founding principle of human society; it constitutes a set of norms and rules that keep together the fabric of a community. It also sets a standard for people’s behaviour by labelling certain forms of behaviour acceptable and others unacceptable. Fate means that whatever happens is unavoidable. It should be kept in mind that this is not a moral concept, although regarding fate as a kind of law does mean that whatever happens is not only inevitable and orderly, it also accords, on a metaphorical level, with what is truthful. The truth is what happens; not what could be or should be, but what is. To refer to fate as a law does attach a kind of correctness to whatever happens — not necessarily a moral correctness, but a correctness nonetheless.

This has implications for our understanding of the *nornir* and the ways in which they operate, because it means that the supernatural quasi-law, which they represent, not only overrides human norms for right and wrong, it lends a degree of acceptability to events and actions that may otherwise be unacceptable. Fate, then, provides a structure, which may be incomprehensible and may go against the grain of human society, but which at the same time helps to prevent a descent into chaos. In this sense fate is a way of perceiving order in disorderly lives. However, it also creates the risk that people may get caught out, because it means that the game has two sets of rules — one that you ought to follow (*lög*) and one that you must follow (*orlög*) because you cannot avoid following it.

Fate rears its legal head in phrases such as *kviðr norna* (*Hamðismál* 30), *norna dómr* (*Fáfnismál* 11) and also *skop norna* (*Hallfreðr*), but there are many other instances where the fate-as-law metaphor is implied in more subtle ways. In these cases, the concept of honour often becomes involved, creating a catch-22 type of situation where *lög* and *orlög* deviate so strongly

from each other that people who fall into the gap between them experience severe repercussions.

A good example is *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 26 (see 2.1.1), where Helgi tells his lover Sigrún that he has killed her brother and father while claiming that the *nornir* decided some of his actions. Helgi brings in the *nornir* as a way of explaining how he has ended up in a situation where he sees no other way but to kill the relatives of his beloved. In doing so he invokes the concept of fate, the inevitable, thereby turning the tragedy into an expression, not of legal or moral correctness, but of a greater underlying truth beyond human comprehension (see Boyer, 1986, pp. 64–7). Clearly, backing out and not killing Sigrún’s brother and father is simply not — as Helgi sees it — an option at all.

Norse heroic poetry contains several clear examples of a similar kind, such as Angantýr’s lament in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* after he has killed his half-brother Hlōðr in a dispute over inheritance from their father. Hlōðr reacts to an insult with armed retaliation, and Angantýr afterwards blames the *nornir* for putting them in this situation.<sup>20</sup> Likewise Brynhildr’s speech in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 6–7 invokes the *nornir* as the powers that have placed her in a situation which she feels pushes her into the extreme reaction of urging her husband, Gunnarr, to kill the man she loves, *Sigurðr*. Also Hamðir’s statement, in *Hamðismál* 28, that the *dísir* urged him to kill his half-brother Erpr describes what is essentially a human reaction to a perceived insult as being driven into the protagonist by a supernatural power akin to fate.

In all cases, a less involved view of the circumstances in which the protagonists find themselves would point to honour as the central issue, not fate.<sup>21</sup> If the focus is shifted towards honour, the explanation for the tragic circumstances of fratricide and the like is that the heroes refuse to back down when it comes to maintaining their pride and reputation. The consequence of backing down, of not reacting to an insult, a deception, an assault on their honour, would be to lose face and thereby lose status, reputation; in short, they would prove themselves to be cowards rather than heroes. At this point the heathen belief in fate crosses the heroic ethical standards, and this is crucial to the Norse perception of what fate is.

In *Guðrúnarhvot* 13, having seen off her two remaining sons, and as they ride away to their certain death for the sake of avenging their half-sister,

Guðrún breaks into a long litany of the sorrows she has been through, describing how she, on the one hand, feels forced into carrying out horrible acts of revenge in the name of honour and, on the other hand, feels tremendous grief even as she does these things. She is caught in a tragic situation of what is deemed necessary in order to maintain honour and the inhumanity of doing this. For this she is, as she puts it, ‘furious with the *nornir*’.

Guðrún makes no secret of the fact that she feels hard done by and that she wishes things could have been otherwise — but at the same time she clearly believes that they could not have turned out any other way. And when it comes to placing the blame for the tragedy, she points not at herself, nor at any other person, but at fate and the *nornir*, as if the cruelties that have taken place were not caused by human stubbornness and by ruthless pursuit of honour, but instead by a supernatural guidance of events. It seems that, when honour is at stake in Norse heroic legendry, people do not blame the fact that their own emotional stability may be a little frayed and that this is why they are overreacting — they do not regard it as overreacting, they regard it as fate and proceed.

Fate, then, is not just what is forced onto a person from the outside — such as falling out with one’s brother or falling in love with the hero — it is also how that particular person reacts in that particular situation. A lot of men who fall out with their brothers would find a peaceful solution rather than kill them, and a lot of women who fall in love with another man would keep it to themselves and not tell their husbands about it; but extreme reactions to extreme circumstances appear to be exactly what defines these special personalities as heroes and heroines — the fact that they, being the individuals they are, react this way.

Similar situations occur in *Íslendingasögur*, for example Vésteinn in *Gísli saga* 12 who is travelling to Gísli’s farm when he meets two farm servants, whom Gísli has sent to warn him not to go there. They let him know that his life will be in danger if he proceeds, to which Vésteinn answers: *Mynda ek aftur hafa horfið ef þið hefðuð hafa hitt mik fyrr en nú falla vötn öll till Dýrafjarðar ok mun ek þangat riða enda er ek þess fúss*, (I would have turned back had you met me earlier, but now all the waters are falling towards Dýrafjörður and I will ride down there; I am keen to do so; ÍF, Vol. 6, p. 40). Vésteinn employs the vocabulary of fate here, stating that there is no other way for him now but to continue, regardless of the

trouble this may bring. But it is just as possible to interpret the situation in such a way that Vésteinn is concerned about his reputation and finds that, by the time he receives the warning, he cannot turn around without making it seem like cowardice. He reacts almost as if he has received a challenge from someone who dares him to pursue the most heroic course of action — the one that leads headlong into trouble — and in accepting the challenge Vésteinn shows what he is truly made of. Living up to the heavy demands of the heroic code of honour may bring tragedy, but at least his reputation will be intact. This is the point at which he refers to the inevitability of his fate (Bek-Pedersen, 2009, p. 30).

That it need not be a tragic fate that awaits the hero shows in Torf-Einarr's *lausavísa*, where he makes a similar allusion to the *nornir* after he has won a battle and made it clear that he is intent on claiming his share of the inheritance from his father on equal footing with his half-brothers. Torf-Einarr has proved his worth as well as, it seems, his right and by invoking the *nornir* he simultaneously claims that this is how it was meant to be, that this is the right outcome. The blending of fate and reputation is evident also here.

I would like at this point to return to Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's *lausavísa*, quoted above, because it draws a parallel very similar to the one I have discussed in this chapter. It is clear that Hallfreðr associates the *nornir* with the heathen world view and that becoming a Christian compels him to turn his back on 'the ancient *nornir*'s decrees', on the ways of the ancestors. It is a new order that is implemented by Christianity and, by referring to the old one as the one instigated by the *nornir*, Hallfreðr conjures up a world view dominated by fate — but also one dominated by honour. Both concepts bring out a clear contrast to the Christian ideals of the New Testament whose central message is summed up in the Sermon on the Mount and which provides a radical shift away from the heathen cultural ideal of a behavioural pattern based on honour and on law codes derived from norms of behaviour. The juxtaposition of Christ and the *nornir* brings this to the surface; they are equivalents in terms of their centrality to the respective world views, but they are opposites in terms of the morals and ethical standards they represent.

The heroes and heroines of Old Norse tradition see themselves predominantly in relation to other human beings and to the cultural codes regarding worth and behaviour; they note that fate is there, as the ultimate

explanation, but they focus very much on what is happening in this world, on the physical level, not on the metaphysical one (Hallberg, 1962, p. 87). Christianity changed this because, whereas neither the Norse gods nor the Norse concept of fate provided people with a moral code, the Christian God did (Green, 1998, pp. 374–5). In Norse tradition, divinity and morality did not necessarily go together; in Christianity they were inseparable.

The concept of *dómr*, judgement, is highly interesting in this context. When it is placed in the hands of the *nornir*, it refers to death (often with a tragic twist), the transition out of life — but with death, the judgement of the *nornir* has been fulfilled. When the concept of *dómr* is placed in the hands of human beings, it refers to something quite different, namely reputation. *Hávamál* 77 famously expresses the situation thus:

Deyr fé,  
 deyia frændr,  
 deyr siálfr it sama;  
 ec veit einn  
 at aldri deyr:  
 dómr um dauðan hvern.  
 ‡  
 Cattle die,  
 kinsmen die,  
 the self must also die;  
 I know one thing  
 that never dies:  
 the judgement of each dead person.

The human judgement of a person is not transitional, but eternal — not just for the duration of his or her lifetime, but for as long as that person is remembered, the judgement will stand. This helps to explain the crossover between fate and honour, because it means that, although there are inescapable supernatural forces at play in this world and although they are prone to raising havoc by following a different set of rules from the ones established in and by human reality, the focus nonetheless remains strongly anchored in human society. The crucial issue is not when or why you meet your fate, but what will be said about you. Your reputation will last much longer than you will, and this is clearly an issue that concerns Old Norse culture deeply — much more so than any idea of predetermination. Contrary to Christian

thinking, it is not important what deities or supernatural beings think of you; what truly matters is how you are regarded by your fellow human beings. Death, the judgement of the *nornir*, is an inescapably given part of life; reputation, the judgement of other people, is defining and definite in quite a different manner. Fate, then, is the lesser evil. Honour is all.

### 5.3 The Power of the Spoken Word

An important aspect still to be discussed is the relationship between fate and speech. In a non-literate society, such as that of Old Norse, law was by definition a spoken matter and therefore phrases like *kviðr norna* and *dómr norna* probably indicate verbal action. There are also some Norse poetic sources which associate the *nornir* directly with certain forms of speech. Furthermore, there seems to be a semantic overlap between ‘weird’ and ‘word’, between *urðr* and *orð*, even if they are etymologically removed from one another. The word is that magical command which brings things into being, and *wyrd* is that power which decides what will be; it is easy to relate these two notions closely to one another.<sup>22</sup>

The *Hauksbók* rendition of *Völuspá* is relevant here, because it brings in the idea of fate in spoken form:

þær lög lögðo,  
þær líf kuro  
alda bǫrnum,  
ørlog at segia.  
‡  
They laid down laws,  
they chose life  
for the children of men,  
fate to speak.

Whereas *Konungsbók* has *ørlog seggia*, using the plural genitive form of *seggr*, ‘man’, *Hauksbók* uses the verb *at segia*, ‘to speak’. Thus, *Hauksbók* introduces an extra verb here, emphasising the role of speech. According to Jackson (1999, p. 87), the extra verb undermines the structure of the stanza as a whole and is probably a later revision (see Sijmons and Gering, 1927, p. 26).<sup>23</sup> It is certainly correct that *alda bǫrnum* and *ørlog seggia* fit together neatly as a pair, as do *þær lög lögðo* and *þær líf kuro*, and the *Konungsbók* version undeniably looks tidier, both grammatically and because it presents



two couplets, each giving two variants of the same image: (1) they laid down the laws and they chose life; (2) children of men and fate of men. In terms of the symmetry of the stanza, the extra verb in *Hauksbók* does look superfluous, but it is interesting to note that the idea of speech appears to have been considered appropriate in this context.

This focus on speech and a link between words and fate also comes across in *Fjölsvinnsmál* 47:

Svipdagr ek heiti,  
 Sólbiartr hét minn faðir,  
 þaðan rákomk vindkalda vego;  
 Urðar orði  
 viðr engi maðr,  
 þótt þat sé við lqst lagit.  
 †  
 Svipdagr I am called,  
 Sólbiartr my father was called,  
 I came hence on wind-cold roads,  
 the words of Urðr  
 no man can hinder,  
 though it was flawed in its creation.

In this instance, fate is clearly conceived of as something spoken, whether it is understood as ‘words of Urðr’, attributing the speech act to a specific supernatural being, or more mundanely as ‘fateful words’ along the lines of what happens in the sagas. The wording *Urðar orði viðr engi maðr* strongly recalls the phrase from *Hamðismál* 30: *qveld lifir maðr ekki eptir qvið norna* (a man does not live out the evening after the *nornir* give their verdict), and also that of the stanza from *Íslendinga saga* 286 [136; 142]: *Urðr mun eigi forðask* (no one can escape fate). All three passages draw on the inevitability of fate, but particularly *Fjölsvinnsmál* and *Hamðismál* have speech acts as the central, determining factor. Fate and speech are also closely linked in two passages from *Ynglingatal*, namely stanza 1 from *Ynglingasaga* 11:

Varð framgengt,  
 þars Fróði bjó,  
 feigðarorð,  
 es at Fjölni kom,  
 ok sikling

svigðis geira<sup>24</sup>  
vággr vindlauss<sup>25</sup>  
of viðá skyldi.  
(ÍF, Vol. 26, p. 26)

✚

Where Fróði lived  
it happened,  
the words of death  
which came to Fjǫlnir;  
it was decided  
that the windless wave of the ox's spears  
would cut down  
the prince.

And stanza 8 from *Ynglingasaga* 18:

Frák, at Dagr  
dauðarorði,  
frægðar fúss,  
of fara skyldi,  
þás valteins  
til Vǫrva kom<sup>26</sup>  
spakfrǫmuðr  
spǫrs at hefna.<sup>27</sup>  
(ÍF, Vol. 26, p. 36)

✚

I have heard that Dagr,  
hungry for fame,  
had to travel according  
to the words of death  
when the warrior  
came to Vǫrvi,  
the wise one,  
to avenge his sparrow.

The idea of death as a spoken message is clearly represented in the phrases *feigðarorð* and *dauðarorð*<sup>28</sup> and these, again, recall the ‘verdict of the *normir*’ and ‘judgement of the *normir*’, especially if considered in relation to the different meanings of the English term ‘sentence’: it can refer to a series

of words forming a grammatically coherent whole, but it can also mean an authoritative decision pronounced by a tribunal. The latter kind of ‘sentence’ can have severe consequences for the life of the person whom it concerns — but is it a sentence until it is pronounced? How else are the words in *Ynglingatal* supposed to operate? Similarly, one might question the validity of the ‘verdict of the *normir*’, or any verdict for that matter, were it to remain silent; indeed, the etymological meaning of ‘verdict’ is ‘to speak truthfully’ (OED, s.v. *verdict*). Speaking is a way of activating or making real the semantic content of words; it is a determining action — potentially creative, but potentially destructive.

*Íslendingasögur* provide numerous examples of fighting and violence, not only leading up to but also resulting from legal proceedings; sometimes people attempt to end a feud via settlement in court, but attempted settlements frequently result in new feuds. When people in the sagas prepare for court cases, the outcome often depends on which side has the more, or the more powerful, supporters rather than on any objective notion of impartial justice.<sup>29</sup> The impression of many court cases described in *Íslendingasögur* is more of a kind of choreographed battle than of a search for ‘the truth’. Muffled by the sanctity of the *þing*, such a court case is fought with words rather than with weapons, although the dividing line between these two is blurred at times, as both can be used with similar intent: to cause injury. A passage from the *Vígslóði* section (Chapter 114)<sup>30</sup> of the early Icelandic law compilation *Grágás* shows that one’s choice of vocabulary was taken very seriously:

Þau eru orð þrjú, ef svo mjög versna málsendar manna, er skóggang varða öll, ef maður kallar mann ragan eða stroðinn eða sorðinn, og skal svo sækja sem önnur fullréttisorð, enda á maður vígt í gegn þeim orðum þrimur. (Gunnar Karlsson *et al.*, 1992, p. 273)

‡

There are three expressions, if words between men ever get so bad, for which the penalty is full outlawry: if a man calls another man womanish or says that he has been buggered or fucked. And they are to be prosecuted like other words requiring full personal compensation, and in retaliation for those three words a man also has the right to kill. (Dennis *et al.*, 2000, p. 354)

Meulengracht Sørensen adds that ‘The most serious verbal offences are thus equated with killing, rape and adultery, and are regarded as more flagrant than, for instance, bodily injury’ (1983, p. 17).<sup>31</sup> These are cases of very strong powers attached to spoken words. The notion that certain words are of a violent and injuring disposition and that speaking them corresponds to using weapons clearly reveals the force attributed to certain forms of speech.

The idea seems to be that speaking out loud makes a thought or an intention definite and turns it into unchangeable reality. Speech, then, can be intentionally or accidentally prophetic by giving shape to the un-shaped and bringing what was mere hypothesis out into actuality.

### 5.3.1 Fate, Prophecy and Speech

With the notion of prophecy, we return to the *vǫlur* discussed above. A prophecy, or *spá*, is precisely the giving of shape to the un-shaped through words, as de Vries has suggested: ‘*Die spá gab also nicht nur an, wie sich die Zukunft voraussichtlich gestalten würde, sondern sie bestimmte auch, wie sie werden sollte*’ (The *spá*, then, did not just give an impression of how the future might turn out, but it determined how it would be; de Vries, 1956, p. 323). The idea is that, as a prophecy is spoken, the future of which it tells becomes unavoidable while the words are being said, because the words do not point towards a mere optional future but, in fact, bind it to that one specific future which they describe. Several scholars have noted this, among them Vésteinn Ólason:

[I]t is as if men fear that dreams will come true through the very act of voicing an interpretation of them,<sup>32</sup> or that spoken prophecy can help to bring about the event prophesied. (Vésteinn Ólason, 1998, p. 120)<sup>33</sup>

Descriptions of *vǫlur* in *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* clearly draw on this notion. *Vatnsdæla saga* 10<sup>34</sup> will serve as an example. Here, an invited *vǫlva* is prophesying for all who approach her, but Ingimundr does not ask her about his future:

Finnan var sett hátt ok búit um hana vegliga; þangat gengu menn til fréttar, hverr ór sínu rúmi, ok spurðu at orlögum sínum. Hon spáði hverjum eptir því sem gekk, en þat var nökkut misjafnt, hversu hverjum líkaði. Þeir fóstbræðr sátu í

rúmunum sínum ok gengu eigi til fréttar; þeir lögðu ok engan hug á spar hennar. Völvan mælti: ‘Hví spyrja þeir inir ungu menn eigi at forlögum sínum, því at mér þykkir þeir merkiligastir menn af þeim, sem hér eru saman komnir?’ Ingimundr svarar: ‘Mér er eigi annara at vita mín forlög fyrr en fram koma, ok ætla ek mitt ráð eigi komit undir þínum tungurótum.’ Hon svarar: ‘Ek mun þó segja þér ófregit.’<sup>35</sup> (ÍF, Vol. 8, p. 29)

†

The Lapp woman, splendidly attired, sat on a high seat. Men left their benches and went forward to ask about their destinies. For each of them she predicted that which eventually came to pass, but each of them took the news in different ways. The foster-brothers sat in their places and did not go to enquire about the future; they placed no trust in her predictions. The seeress said, ‘Why do those young men not ask about their futures, because they seem to me to be the most outstanding of the men assembled here?’ Ingimund answered, ‘It is not important to me to know my future life before it happens, and I do not think that my future lies at the root of your tongue.’ She answered, ‘I will nevertheless tell you without being asked.’ (CSI, Vol. 4, p. 14)

What she proceeds to say is also what actually happens to Ingimundr in due course. His future, it seems, did lie at the root of her tongue and she shaped it with her words. ‘When *völur* are consulted in mythological and legendary sources, it is assumed that they are truthfully predicting an inevitable future’ (McKinnell, 2005, p. 98). The binding powers of spoken prophecies gives the *völva* not only power over but possibly also responsibility for the predictions she makes; one could certainly imagine that if people held such beliefs about her pronouncements, she might want to choose her words carefully. If people thought that their lives depended on what the *völva* said, the situation could become tricky to handle, especially if what she had to say was not entirely positive.<sup>36</sup> The fact that *Hávamál* 87 regards *völo vilmæli* (a *völva* who says what you would like to hear) as highly suspicious apparently confirms that *völur* are surrounded by an air of fear mixed with hope.

*Laxdæla saga* 39 provides an example of what looks like an attempt to avoid such responsibility when Óláfr pái is talking about Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir

and says to his son Kjartan that he thinks she is a suitable match for Kjartan, but then adds: *Nú er þat hugbóð mitt, en eigi vil ek þess spá, at vér frændr ok Laugarmenn berim eigi allsendis gæfu til um vár skipti* (ÍF, Vol. 5, p. 112) (I have a feeling, although I won't make it a prediction, that our dealings with the Laugar family will not turn out well, CSI, Vol. 5, p. 57). Óláfr is trying to both have his cake and eat it; he says that he is worried about how the relationship between Kjartan's family and Guðrún's will fare in the long run, but he also says that he will not voice those worries. He almost says that he will not say what he has just said, but the way in which he phrases the thought makes a clear distinction between the two verbs where *spá*, 'to predict', is something other and more than *segja*, 'to say'.<sup>37</sup> There is little evidence that the ensuing events should stem from Óláfr's words, and the scene seems properly understood as a narrative device for heightening the tension of the plot. The notion that speaking about something can influence that thing is nevertheless lurking behind Óláfr's utterance.

There is a good example of the power of speech directly influencing events in *Fóstbræðra saga* 7:

Þorgeirr mælti: 'Hvat ætlar þú, hvárr okkarr myndi af öðrum bera, ef vit reyndim með okkr?'

Þormóðr svarar: 'Þat veit ek eigi, en hitt veit ek, at sjá spurning þín mun skilja okkra samvistu ok fõruneyti, svá at vit munum eigi lǫngum ásamt vera.'

Þorgeirr segir: 'Ekki var mér þetta alhugat, at ek vilda, at vit reyndim með okkr harðfengi.'

Þormóðr mælti: 'Í hug kom þér, meðan þú mæltir, ok munu vit skilja félagit.' (ÍF, Vol. 6, pp. 150–1)

†

Thorgeir said, 'Which of us do you think would win if we confronted each other?'

Thormod answered, 'I don't know, but I do know that this question of yours will divide us and end our companionship. We cannot stay together.'

Thorgeir said, 'I wasn't really speaking my mind — saying that I wanted us to fight each other.'

Thormod said, 'It came into your mind as you spoke it and we shall go our separate ways.' (CSI, Vol. 2, p. 344)

What happens is that Þorgeirr expresses a thought which he says is entirely hypothetical ('what if'), but Þormóðr answers that, because Þorgeirr has put the thought into words and spoken it out loud, it is no longer a hypothesis but a fact. The thought has left its ethereal guise of being a mere possibility and has become concrete in the words; its expression in speech has given it the quality of a *spá*, and now the foster-brothers cannot escape it. It is an accidental prophecy.

An example of another kind comes from *Njáls saga* 38:

Bergþóra ræddi við Njál, er hon sá féit: 'Efnt þykkisk þú hafa heitin þín, en nú eru eptir mín heit.' 'Eigi er nauðsyn á, at þú efnir þau,' segir Njáll. 'Hins hefir þú til getit,' sagði hin, 'ok skal svá vera.' (ÍF, Vol. 12, p. 102)

‡

Bergþóra said to Njáll as soon as she saw the money, 'You think you have kept your promise now, but mine has yet to be kept.' 'There's no need for you to keep it,' said Njáll. 'But you've [brought it about]<sup>38</sup> that I will,' she said, 'and so it shall be.' (CSI, Vol. 3, p. 46)

Here, Bergþóra refuses to let Njáll forget what he himself said earlier on, namely that he would get a freeman's compensation for the killing of Atli, who is only a slave, and that Bergþóra should have Atli's death avenged. After Atli has been killed, Njáll receives the money and Bergþóra now wants the revenge to which, logically speaking, she is not entitled after Njáll has accepted the money:

Bergþóra is here taking great advantage of Njáll's having made a prediction. Because he has prophesied she purports to be bound to fulfil his prediction as well as her own promise. That is, she ... wittily denies her free will and with it her accountability for the action she is about to take. She is shifting the responsibility to Njáll. (Miller, 1986, p. 107)

Again, the spoken word is a binding factor. It binds people to what they say and it binds events to the ways in which they have been verbally expressed and described. This gives a close parallel to the relationship between text and textile, between words and their concrete manifestations.

A point of discussion is whether such incidents should be taken as realistic — that people actually did such things, that they spoke and thought in

this way — or whether the notion is employed as a literary motif or narrative technique with the aim of building up tension in the story.<sup>39</sup> My reply to this is that attributing significantly deterministic powers to the spoken word is by no means unique to Old Norse tradition but is common in many traditional societies, particularly non-literate ones.<sup>40</sup> Raudvere says:

De uttalade orden tillmättes ett stort inflytande över livets olika angelägenheter. Verkan av en uttalad sats kunde inte ifrågasättas och kunde aldrig tas tillbaka — nästan som om den tagit fysisk gestalt, den fanns där som något absolut. De kunde bara motverkas genom något motsvarande starkt ord. Starka och maktbemängda ord återkommer genom hela sagalitteraturen. Ord skapade verklighet — inte bara tvärtom. (Raudvere, 2003, p. 42)

✚

Great influence over the various affairs of life was attributed to the spoken word. The effect of a spoken sentence could not be questioned and could never be taken back — almost as if it took on physical form, it was there as something absolute. It could only be counteracted through equally strong words. Strong and powerful words appear throughout the saga literature. Words created reality — not just the other way round.

That speech can be a prescriptive act as much as it can be a descriptive one is important. The spoken word is of enormous importance, especially in an oral society that does not rely on the written medium. Like the wool in the wool basket, the unshaped mass of potential, but as yet unspun, threads, so a person's thoughts or ideas are a mass of potential, but as yet unspoken, words. Some are never voiced; the ones that are voiced become part of the actuality of the world. This shaping power of speech may explain why some *vǫlur* seem reluctant to speak at all: once spoken, there is no way of taking words back, and the *spá* not spoken is not dangerous because it is not a *spá* at all.

As an additional note to this discussion, ideas about speech may be relevant to the etymology of the word *norn*. Very few suggestions have been made and the two most common ones are:

Den ursprungliga betydelsen av ordet norna är omstridd.  
Anknytande till nornornas spådomsfunktion har man



sammanställt det med det svenska dialektordet *norna* (*nyrna*), ett verb som betyder ‘hemligt meddela’. En annan etymologi förknippar ordet med en indoeuropeisk rot *ner* med betydelsen ‘vrída’, ‘sno’. Bakom denna innebörd skulle ligga föreställningen om ödestråden, som *nornorna* snor och sammantvinnar.<sup>41</sup> (Ström, 1985 [1961], p. 202)

‡

The original meaning of the word *norn* is disputed. In connection with the prophesying function of the *nornir* it has been set in relation to the Swedish dialect word *norna* (*nyrna*), a verb which means ‘secretly communicate’. Another etymology connects the word to an Indo-European root *ner*, meaning ‘twist’, ‘wind’. This should stem from the notion of a fate-thread, which the *nornir* twist and twine.

As evidence for *nornir* twisting and twining threads is so sparse, the suggested link to thread production should probably be taken with a pinch of salt. The suggestion of ‘whispering, carrying messages in secret’ is more interesting, especially in the light of the discussions in this chapter. The Indo-European root (*s*)*ner*- has two meanings — ‘murmuring, rumbling’ and ‘turning, winding, drawing together’ (AeW, s.v.; Pokorny, 1959–69, s.v.) — and a link between them is by no means impossible.<sup>42</sup> Of these two options, ‘murmuring’ seems more convincing, as the *nornir* speak, making decrees and pronouncing verdicts. ‘Turning, drawing together’ also fits into the greater picture, albeit less directly related to the *nornir*. However, producing any proof for an etymology of the term *norn* remains beyond reach.

#### 5.4 Summary: An Impartial Balance

Several interlinked issues have been discussed in this chapter: fate-as-law, fate-as-honour and fate-as-speech. The powerful statement made by Brynhildr in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 7, *Orð mæltac nú iðromc eptir þess* (The words I spoke now I will regret later), really sums up the whole complex explored here — she feels that her honour has been tainted by the deception of the Gjúkungar, her sense of honour implores on her the need for revenge and by putting this into words she stakes out the line of action she is going to take. As mentioned above, several references to the *nornir* involve similar sorts of conundrum-like situations where individuals feel

forced into ‘doing things right’, so to speak — that is, to follow the behavioural norms and expectations and act in accordance with the honour code, even at the highest cost — instead of ‘doing the right thing’ — that is, to act humanely and in accordance with their emotional attachments without consideration for what others may think. In these situations, it becomes hard to see exactly where honour ends and fate begins. What the heroes and heroines are talking about seems really to be a code of honour, but one which they refer to as fate. They speak of what they must do (fate), but the course of action staked out is only a must as long as they refuse to ignore how others will judge their actions (reputation). This is where the quasi-legal aspect of the *normir* runs into the link between the concept of fate and the tragedies that arise from sticking closely to the behavioural pattern outlined by the honour culture and obeying the avenging imperative.

Brynhildr is thoroughly unhappy about the circumstances she finds herself in, but at the same time she is not prepared to back down. Instead, she regards it as a challenge and goes on to prove that she is fully capable of meeting that challenge. It is clear that she is keenly aware of the emotional cost of what she is doing — she herself says that she will regret choosing this course of action — but other things matter more to her than emotions: honour, reputation, revenge — all the core values of Norse society as it is portrayed in the sagas and *Eddas*. This is what she refers to as fate, as the inevitable and unavoidable. Brynhildr is not exactly held up as a role model for ordinary women to emulate — in *Guðrúnarkviða I* the very opposite is, in fact, the case — and yet her toughness is the very thing that makes her a heroine, someone who is worth talking about because she aspires to fulfil the heroic ideals. Her uncompromising attitude is echoed time and again in the actions of saga characters and legendary figures. Talk of honour and talk of fate frequently go hand in hand; both fulfil a role similar to the law in people’s consciousness — an element that defines the individual or the society, not because it is imposed from the outside, but because it requires the individual and the society to define themselves in outwardly visible and tangible ways.

The etymological closeness between the Old Norse words *ørlog*, *forlog* and *log* is much more than mere etymology; it is indicative of a deep, fundamental aspect of the Norse world view, which places the *normir* — invisible, intangible, impersonal though they may be — as beings central to the order of the world.

The connection between fate, law and honour may also help to explain why the *nornir* are often seen in a negative light. The case of the *fullréttisorð* described in *Vígslóði* can serve as a clarifying example, because the law here specifies only negative words, not positive ones. This, however, does not mean that the law was regarded as a negatively loaded tool; the very opposite is, in fact, the case: the law was there to secure and maintain the foundations of human society. It is not unlikely that the *nornir* were imagined in a similar way. Although they are often encountered in negatively, even tragically, slanted situations (as the law is brought into play only when there is trouble), it could well be a mistake to underestimate their role as providers of balance and stability, so clearly portrayed in *Völuspá* 19. But, whereas *lög* made sense on the surface and was intelligible to everyone, the much more profound *ørlog* was hidden, inaccessible and incomprehensible, except to those who possessed abilities beyond the ordinary human perceptions, such as *völur*.

Furthermore, the idea of speech as a method not just for describing events but also for bringing them into being is evident in Norse tradition. This has some impact on our understanding of prophecies, accidental ones (such as *Fóstbræðra saga* 7) as well as deliberate ones (such as *Eiríks saga rauða* 4), because it touches on the semantic association of *orð* with *urðr*, ‘word’ with ‘weird’, and the notion of fate-as-speech. The metaphors fate-as-law and fate-as-speech are present in the sources in much clearer ways than is the case with fate-as-textile and, in several instances, law and speech are linked directly to the *nornir*. Forms of speech are strongly implied in phrases such as *kviðr norna* (*Hamðismál* 30) and *dómr norna* (*Fáfnismál* 11, *Ynglingatal* 24). Yet it is also evident that there are strong semantic links between speech and textile as textile metaphors are often used to describe acts of speaking, not only in Old Norse, but in many different cultures. It may ultimately be impossible to separate speech and fabric completely from one another as the text and the textile continue to tangle up in one another. But if we are to judge by the evidence presented in the sources, fate-as-speech is a much more dominant way of describing that which the *nornir* represent than is fate-as-textile. To some extent, however, they feed off each other.

## Notes to Chapter 5

- 1 For example *Johnson's English Dictionary*: 'Fate; 1. Destiny; an external series of successive causes. 2. Event predetermined. 3. Death; destruction. 4. Cause of death' (1809, p. 308). The emphasis here is on external causality and on the singular event of death. 'Destiny; 1. The power that spins life and determines the fate. 2. Fate; invincible necessity. 3. Doom; condition in future time' (1809, p. 220). The emphasis here is on the inevitability of future events. Interesting is the fact that both definitions lean on each other, defining 'fate' as destiny and 'destiny' as fate.
- 2 Wierzbicka (1992, pp. 92–5) discusses the semantic content attached to the English terms 'fate' and 'destiny' in the decades leading up to the end of the twentieth century.
- 3 Mittner (1955); Neumann (1955); Weber (1969); Liberman (1994); Simek (2004).
- 4 Translation kindly provided by Marieluise Bek-Pedersen.
- 5 Richard Holloway at the Edinburgh Book Festival, 30 August 2004.
- 6 Nevertheless, in Scots it is still possible to 'dree yer weird', that is, 'endure your fate'. I am grateful to John McKinnell for reminding me of this.
- 7 The question of 'original' meaning of a term is not a useful one to pose, and the circumstances of 'fate' and 'destiny' in modern English prove that etymology will not necessarily lead to greater clarity — these two words are often defined in terms of each other, which is indicative of a blurring of the 'original' borders between them. Such blurring may have occurred in Old Norse, too.
- 8 *Míqtuðr* (m.) has been translated as 'what has been measured out, measure (of fate), fate, death' (LP, s.v.), referring to the (passive) product rather than the (active) producer. But it has also been translated as 'leader, ruler who possesses the power, particularly has the power to determine the fate of people' (Frtz, s.v.; compare ÁBM, s.v.; AeW, s.v.; C/V, s.v.), referring — in rather stark contrast to the above translation — to the measurer, the one who rules. The word occurs only rarely in Old Norse. Its Old English cognate, *metod*, occurs with some frequency in *Beowulf* where it is understood to refer to God (Green, 1998, pp. 386–7; C/V, p. 434). It is related to 'metre' and probably indicates a supernatural power that allots a certain amount (of time, of good, of evil) to humans. *Auðna* (f.) translates as 'fate', with the additional sense of 'happiness, fortune, good luck, blessing' (AeW, s.v.; C/V, s.v.; Frtz, s.v.; LP, s.v.), and seems related to the noun *auðr*, 'wealth, abundance'. *Auðna* has many positive associations, but the use of the adjective *auðinn*, 'fated', is by no means exclusively positive — it is used in contexts of death, hardship or trouble: in *Gísla saga* 9, Gísli says to his wife *Auðr*: *at mæla verðr einnhverr skapanna málum, ok þat mun fram koma, sem auðit verðr* (ÍF, Vol. 6, p. 34) (Fate must find someone to speak through. Whatever is meant to happen will happen; CSI, Vol. 2, p. 10). Arnórr jarlaskáld, in *Hrynhenda Magnúsdrápa* 12, supposedly c.1046, says: *auðit vas þá flotnum dauða* (*Magnúss saga ins góða* 24; ÍF, Vol. 28, p. 39; the men were destined to die). Both *míqtuðr* and *auðna* conjure up ideas that are reminiscent of what is associated with the *nornir*; *míqtuðr* as 'the measurer' recalls the runic inscription from Borgund and the double-sidedness of *auðna* recalls the sinister and benign aspects of the *nornir*. But these two terms are nowhere linked directly to the *nornir*.
- 9 For example *Vatnsdæla saga* 10 (ÍF, Vol. 8, pp. 29–30).
- 10 This recalls the term *óscop* in *Hávamál* 98, meaning 'something that goes against fate, an unnatural thing' (LP, s.v.).
- 11 A personified supernatural force of fate seems to have been converted into something like 'the will of God'; Winterbourne (2004) discusses this.

- 12 I am grateful to Ulla Loumand for this suggestion.
- 13 Further on law, see Miller (1990); Fenger *et al.* (1993); Sandvik and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (2005).
- 14 One of the best examples is *Njáls saga* where most of the plot is closely related to complex court cases.
- 15 This connection is clearly spelled out in some early medieval Scandinavian landscape laws, such as the Danish *Jydske Lov* from 1241, which opens with this line: *Mæth logh skal land bygiæ*s (modern Danish: *Med lov skal land bygges*; Through law the country shall be founded; Petersen and Andersen, 1929, p. 65). Compare *Njáls saga* 70: *með lofum skal land várt byggja, en með ólofum eyða* (Through law our land shall be founded, but through its lacking destroyed; ÍF, Vol. 12, p. 172).
- 16 *Hákonar saga góða* 14 (ÍF, Vol. 26, pp. 167–8) portrays *siðr* in a heathen context, *Vatnsdæla saga* 46 (ÍF, Vol. 8, p. 125) in a Christian one. Raudvere explains: *Begreppet siðr inkluderade både vad som antogs vara traditionella föreställningar och sättet på vilket saker skulle göras. Denna mångtydighet innebär att ordet användes i vitt skilda sammanhang såväl kognitivt och känslomässigt som juridiskt och socialt* (The concept of *siðr* included both what were perceived to be traditional notions as well as the way in which things ought to be done. This versatility means that the word could be employed in many different contexts, cognitively and emotionally as well as legally and socially; 2003, p. 89).
- 17 A *þingstaðr* is described in *Egils saga* 56: *En þar er dómrinn var settr, var vøllr sléttur ok settar niðr heslistengr í vøllinn í hring, en loðð um útan snæri umhverfis; váru þat kølluð vébønd; en fyrir innan í hringinum sátu dómendr, tólf ór Firðafylki ok tólf ór Sygnafylki, tólf ór Hørdafylki; þær þrennar tylftir manna skyldu þar dæma um mál manna* (ÍF, Vol. 2, p. 154; The court was held on a flat plain, marked out by hazel poles with a rope around them. This was known as staking out a sanctuary. Inside the circle sat the court, twelve men from the Fjordane province, twelve from Sognefjord province and twelve from Hordaland province. These three dozen men were to rule on all the cases; CSI, Vol. 1, p. 105).
- 18 See Chapter 2, note 65. In *Vølsunga saga* 22, Brynhildr clearly expresses volition when she says that *þik vil ek hellzt eiga þott ek kiosa um alla menn* (Even if I could choose from all the men in the world, it's you I most want to marry; Grimstad, 2000, pp. 154–5). The *valkyrjur* in *Hákonarmál*, however, act on orders given to them, not according to their own personal preferences. These *valkyrjur* select, whereas Brynhildr chooses.
- 19 It is interesting to consider the phrase ‘fate unfolds’ in relation to the notion of ‘law’ as consisting of layers.
- 20 However, the saga itself suggests very clearly that the fault lies with Gizurr Grýtingaldi, Heiðrekr's foster-father, who resembles an Odinic figure who provokes battle. I am grateful to John McKinnell for pointing this out.
- 21 Another kind of less involved view may regard this way of blaming the *nornir* or the *dísir* as simply a dubious sort of alibi. See also Ármann Jakobsson (2006, esp. pp. 246–7) for a discussion of the heroic emotions involved in such situations.
- 22 I am grateful to Terry Gunnell for this suggestion. Also the noun form and verb form of the English word ‘spell’ are interesting in this context.
- 23 Jackson suggests that the revision is made either because the understanding of oral listing devices was in decline or as a deliberate attempt at ‘modernising’ the poem for a literate audience (1999, pp. 87–8).
- 24 *Svigðir* is a kenning for an ox; *svigðis geir*, ‘ox-spear’, is a horn, also used for drinking.

- 25 *Vágr vindlauss*, ‘windless wave’ or ‘calm sea’; a kenning for the beer-vat in which Fjölfnir drowned.
- 26 Vörvi is understood in *Ynglingatal* as a place name, but may relate to an Old English word for ‘shore’, *wearoþ* (ÍF, Vol. 26, pp. 36–7).
- 27 Dagr understood the language of birds. He had a sparrow that told him many things; it was killed by a farmer in Vörvi.
- 28 The *nás orð*, ‘corpse words’, spoken by the prophesying *vǫlva* in *Baldurs draumar* 4 also spring to mind.
- 29 For example *Íslendinga saga* 235 [85; 90] (Örnólfur Thorsson *et al.*, 1988, Vol. 1, p. 338), where Sturla openly declares that *Pess mun eg njóta nú að eg hefi vald meira en þér* (I will make full use of the fact that I have greater forces than you; Miller, 1990, p. 196); *Vatnsdæla saga* 35 (ÍF, Vol. 8, p. 94), where a fight is averted when Finnbogi realises the size of Þorsteinn’s force; and *Víglundar saga* 6 (ÍF, Vol. 14, p. 73), where Ketill warns Þórgrímr not to challenge him because Ketill has more men on his side.
- 30 *Víglóði* is the only section of *Grágás* known with certainty to have been written down at Hafliði Másson’s farm at Breiðabólstaðr during the winter of 1117–18, indicating that this law is of great age.
- 31 One might expect such injurious words to have counterparts in healing ones (as curses have counterparts in blessings), but the law, like the general image of the *normir*, is negatively slanted in specifying negative words only, not positive ones.
- 32 Compare this to Guðrún’s interpretation of Atli’s dream in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 38–43.
- 33 See also Vésteinn Ólason (1998, p. 124), Lassen (2003, p. 29), Raudvere (2003, pp. 42–56).
- 34 AM 559 4º, c.1686–8.
- 35 In this text, *orlög* and *forlög* are used entirely synonymously with one another.
- 36 This happens in *Hrólfs saga kraka* 3 (AM 285 4º, c.1600–1700), where King Fróði is threatening the *vǫlva* to continue her prophecy while Signý is trying to stop her prophesying any more (FSN, Vol. 1, pp. 7–9). In *Víga-Glúms saga* 12 Saldís argues with a *vǫlva* over the prophecy she has given, because Saldís thought she deserved better for having given the *vǫlva* good gifts (ÍF, Vol. 9, p. 41). Both texts hint at gifts as a way of potentially influencing the *vǫlva* to give favourable prophecies, but they also indicate that there is no certain way of obtaining such favour. This may be understood in such a way that gifts do not affect the future which the *vǫlva* sees; the most she can do is keep quiet, but she cannot alter the future events she sees.
- 37 Óláfr pái apparently distinguishes between a statement, which describes an action, and a performative utterance, which *is* the action verbalised by the words. Austin (1962, p. 5) makes the same distinction: ‘the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as saying something.’
- 38 Both CSI and Cook (2001 [1997], p. 66) translate as ‘guess’ but the verb *geta* has many meanings, including ‘attain, bring about, say’ (Frtz s.v.). Alternatively, ‘Berghóra’ may mean ‘to say’: ‘but you have mentioned the alternative, namely that I *would* keep my promise’, that is to say, in the very act of saying that she does not need to, Njáll has voiced the possibility that she will or must seek to avenge Atli.
- 39 In some cases, such as *Njáls saga*, this kind of narrative strategy may also serve to explore the moral problems of the saga; the final conclusion of *Njáls saga* seems to point to a need for reconciliation rather than vengeance. I am grateful to John McKinnell for this observation.
- 40 Speaking or singing things into being occurs frequently in *Kalevala*, for example in *Lemminkäinen’s journey to Pohjola* 139–40 where Lemminkäinen says ‘I’ll create, by songs

of magic, both a man and horse of alder'; and in *Marjatta* 483–6 where Väinämöinen says 'began his songs of magic, for the last time sang them loudly, sang himself a boat of copper' (Kirby and Branch, 1985, pp. 351, 645).

41 See also AeW, p. 412; de Vries (1956, p. 273).

42 The description of how to use *málrúnar*, 'speech-runes', in *Sigrdrífumál* 12 says: *Þær um vindr, þær um vefr, þær um setr allar saman* (wind them about, twist them about, put them all together), which is interesting for the seeming overlap of how to use words (speaking) and how to twist things together (spinning) and recalls the *hardsnúin fræði* in *Laxdæla saga* 35. It is possible that *mál* in *málrúnar* refers to something more than speech, as the term covers a wide range of meanings (Frtz s.v. *mál*), but some sort of verbal act does seem to be a dominant trait in the root meaning of it.





## Conclusions

As should now be abundantly evident, it is not the nature of mythology to be single-minded; rather, it is to be flexible. However, this does not mean that conclusions cannot be reached. Although the sources that have come down to us have all passed through numerous filters before we pass them through our own, and although there is no such thing as unprocessed myth, it is still possible to deduce from the sources that we do have what is going on in them.

The picture of the *nornir* that emerges is a complex one, which spans much more than what the common stereotype pretends to reveal. Although it is hardly possible to sum up all of the findings in one neat and concise answer, it is nonetheless clear that there are important aspects to be found beyond the stereotypical idea of three *nornir* who spin and who represent past, present and future. Close analysis of the sources has shown that, indeed, these three ‘facts’ — that there are three *nornir*, that they spin and that they represent time — have turned out to be insufficient in their description of what these beings are all about. Although it must be kept in mind that logically coherent and standard answers are unlikely to emerge from a body of such gloriously inconsistent material as the sources for Old Norse mythology constitute, it is still possible to obtain some answers to the questions which initially gave rise to this research:

1. Why is fate so often represented in feminine guise?
2. What is the connection between the *nornir* and textile-related work?
3. What does it mean to regard fate as a kind of law?

It has been shown that it is possible to distinguish between *nornir* and related beings such as *vǫlur*, *dísir* and *valkyrjur*, even if complete clarity cannot be obtained. Overlaps remain and the similarities between the separate categories are in many ways obvious; it is the differences that are interesting. Two

aspects in particular set the *nornir* apart from the rest: (1) early evidence of any cult is absent — there are only late sources for this; and (2) they are rarely represented as beings that are physically present or interact directly with human beings. This is very revealing of how they were regarded in Old Norse culture.

Close analysis of those text passages and contexts in which the *nornir* are mentioned has shown that there is a tendency for the term to be employed in situations that concern harsh reality and difficult choices between personal affiliation and societal norms and expectations. The impression is that fate and honour are concepts that relate to each other in fundamental ways, because both are regarded as determining factors in the lives of human beings. Fate is present as what is given, as the potential and the possibilities based on which a person lives his or her life; honour is present as the ideal to strive towards in the choices a person has to make during the course of his or her life. Fate determines the initial conditions, the starting point as well as the end, and with this come certain limitations. Honour determines a person's worth and status in society. But, whereas fate is allotted by some uncontrolled and uncontrollable supernatural power, honour is allotted by the wider society and by a person's peers. The focus in Norse culture seems to have been on establishing and maintaining honour, so that fate becomes more or less a nasty, unavoidable side effect of this focus. What was important was a person's relationship to their society, not to divine or supernatural powers.

The exploration of the three names attached to the *nornir* in certain sources — Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld — has shown that the relationship between the *nornir* and the concept of time is at best awkward. To equate fate with time and regard the *nornir* as representatives of past, present and future can only be done through these three names and, in Old Norse tradition, this interpretation is probably exclusive to *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*, of which the latter is dependent of the former. It is certainly of some concern that no other sources connect the *nornir* to time.

The fact that the *nornir*, and most of the beings they compare to, are conceived of as feminine seems ultimately to be rooted in the biological fact that it is the female who gives birth to new life. This relates the *nornir* to mother figures and ancestress figures, indicating that they encompass benign, life-affirming aspects, although these are not often brought to the

fore in the source material. Their female nature would also account for the tendency to associate fate not only with birth but also with other specifically female tasks, even if such tasks are rarely connected directly to the *nornir* themselves. The argument here is that there is a general symbolic correspondence between, on the one hand, the strongly female connotations of the *dyngja* and the kind of work that takes place inside it and, on the other hand, the association of fate with birth and with mother figures.

The fact that the *nornir* have a tendency to figure predominantly as conceptual figures lurking somewhere in the background rather than as physically manifest beings may be what prevents them from being portrayed as engaging in human activities, such as those taking place in the *dyngja*. Every way of describing what they do is more or less metaphorical — it is a likening of some human activity, such as weaving, to a metaphysical action, such as determining. This means that it is possible to use weaving as an image of fate, even without ever portraying the *nornir* as weavers, because the interaction between the warp and weft can be likened to the way in which intangible fate is actualised in actions and events in human reality. Whether this deep layer of meaning was part of the conscious usage of the metaphor, or merely of the subconscious one, is, however, uncertain. The fact that it can be detected in the tradition does not necessarily warrant the conclusion that it was overtly intended by any one poet or storyteller.

The fate-as-textile metaphor provides a close parallel to two images that are rather more prominent in Old Norse tradition, namely fate-as-speech and fate-as-law. The semantic overlap of textile with text allows for textile-related activities to be interpreted as equivalents to verbal acts, and the role of the warp in clothmaking allows it to be seen as a predetermining factor, which the weft can neither escape nor exist without. There is a complex of three intertwining metaphors tangled up in this: fate-as-speech, speech-as-textile and fate-as-textile. The result is that the *nornir* are associated with fate-as-textile by proxy, even if a direct link is only very rarely established.

The dominant method of portraying the way in which the *nornir* were thought to exercise their powers is expressed through legal metaphors, which relate closely to issues of speech. Like the textile metaphor, law in the sense of actual legal dealings is an approximation rather than a direct description of what the *nornir* do. The law that operates in human society is not a manifestation of fate, but there is some overlap even so, because

Old Norse law to a large extent was based on cultural norms of behaviour and because fate tends to be mentioned when people get into a tangle over situations, usually tragic, where the norms dictate that they commit some wrongdoing no matter how they decide to react. This sort of catch-22 situation is portrayed many times over in Norse tradition. Legendary heroes and saga characters who end up with the hard choice of either giving up their hard-earned reputations and settling for less or killing someone whom they ought not to kill will often refer to the notion of fate as the force that drives them to pursue honour, revenge and reputation, even relentlessly. They typically choose to kill, rather than to settle for less, but, crucially, they do not speak of themselves as having a choice; they speak of this particular choice as their fate. The avenging imperative as an established cultural norm can take on absurd proportions but this, it seems, was the risk one had to live with. The attitude appears, in fact, to have been fairly pragmatic. While it was never acceptable to do ‘the wrong thing’, whatever that may be in a given situation, doing nothing was not acceptable either except, occasionally, in a deliberate — and Christian — decision to go against the heroic code, such as at the end of *Njáls saga*.

The semantic association of *orð* with *urðr*, ‘word’ with ‘weird’, makes clear that the spoken word plays an important role in issues of fate. It establishes a link to prophecy and divination as ways of discovering and making manifest the unknown but nevertheless inevitable fate. The *nornir*, it may be argued, represent the truth — the truth that was and is and remains — while the question of whether the truth is known or not is a completely separate issue. Speech, then, can be a way of actualising the hidden truth, through either accidental or deliberate prophecy, and this taps into the fate-as-speech and fate-as-textile metaphors but also relates to the legal metaphor in an oral culture where law, too, is manifest in speech and words.

What the literary sources make abundantly clear is that fate in Old Norse tradition is not something in the face of which people admit defeat or to which they meekly submit, yet neither do they believe themselves capable of escaping or overcoming it. When people encounter what they regard as fate, they see it as a challenge to be confronted, as though the very response to that challenge constitutes its meaning. To believe in fate was not something that invited resignation — indeed, it seems to have been regarded instead as an invitation to action, a potential to fulfil, even a chance

## Conclusions

for the hero or heroine to show what he or she was truly made of. That they might die in the process does not seem to have taken away the meaning of their life — it most often seems to have had quite the opposite effect.



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